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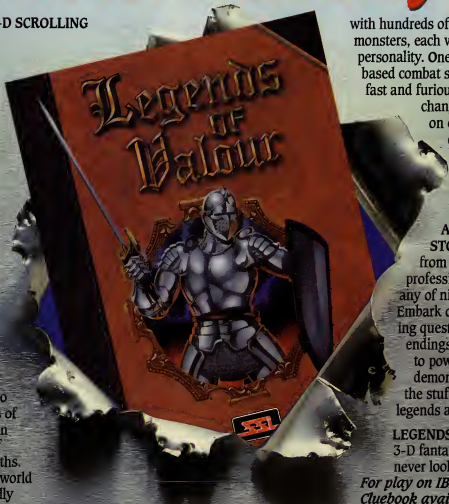
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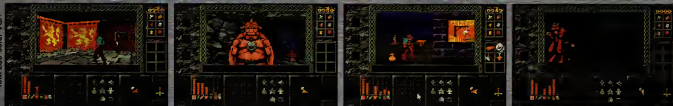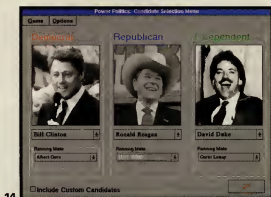TO BE CHALLENGING.**

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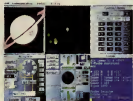
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EDITOR'S NOTES

This issue marks the one-year anniversary of our name change from *Game Players PC Strategy Guide* to *PC Entertainment*. The new title was chosen to reflect our commitment to keep you informed on all aspects of entertainment software for MS-DOS systems, from sound boards and new graphics cards to CD-ROM technology and trends in game development. At the same time, we were determined to continue providing accurate, honest reviews which would help you in deciding which games were right for you.

Looking back over the past year, it's clear that our new format is more in tune than ever with what's going on in the PC gaming community. The advent of CD-ROM releases, combined with game designers' efforts to fully exploit the new generation of sound cards, has resulted in a new era in PC sound. And to keep you on top of this rapidly evolving technology, we've brought you a buyer's guide to sound cards, an introduction to the exciting world of MIDI, an explanation of how sound cards work, and a rundown on which speakers are best suited for your gaming needs.

Another area affecting all gamers is the ever-increasing demands that today's releases place on your PC. In the past year we've seen the arrival of several programs requiring over 600K of RAM, along with a couple of other games taking up over 20 megs of hard drive space. Tim Victor's guide to performance-enhancing software on page 20 is full of tips and info on how to optimize your system's memory, storage space, and processing speed. And you can expect similar features in future issues to help you maximize your gaming enjoyment.

Last but not least, I'll take this chance to repeat a message you've seen before in this space: We want to hear from you! We need your ideas and suggestions in order to keep bringing you the best and most thorough coverage of PC gaming available, so keep those letters coming.

Stephen Poole
Editor

SNEAK PreView

CAESAR

RAGNAROK

What do you get when you blend *Sim City* with *Centurion*? Something very much like *Caesar*, a new game from Impressions.

The game begins in the First Century B.C., just after the

fall of the Republic and Caesar Augustus's rise to power. As a reward for your support, the Emperor has given you governorship of a province.

Your job is two-fold: create a capital city which is economically and militarily strong, and then use it as a center of administrative gravity to create a prosperous province. You'll have to balance development costs against immediate and long-term benefits, create a road network and a water supply, and be prepared at all times to march your garrison against barbarian invaders.

There are two main map screens: one shows the terrain around your capital city, the other displays the entire province. On either map, you generate structures and roads by clicking on an icon, positioning it, and clicking again to anchor it in place. A simple mouse-drag enables you to lay pipe for aqueducts, or stone for roads and defensive walls.

The center of your city will be the forum, the administrative and social heart of the town. Forums come in many sizes,

from the modest Aventine to the grandiose Romanum — the larger and grander the forum, the greater the area of its civilizing influence.

As governor, you will be judged for four qualities: how peaceful life is, how many public and cultural amenities your citizens enjoy, how prosperous your economy is, and how well developed the transportation network is on a province-wide basis. If you achieve a certain level of administrative excellence, the Emperor will promote you, sending you to command a new and more challenging province. You can find out how you're doing, as well as obtain valuable advice, by clicking on the Forum screen and consulting one of the advisors found there. In fact, every task in the game can be accomplished by pointing and clicking.

Impressions has made *Caesar* easy to play, and care has been taken to preserve a sense of historical authenticity. The icons representing the types of structures you'll be building are straightforward — you can jump right in and begin playing right away if you like. And though the level of graphic detail isn't as fine as in *Sim City*, *Caesar* is more colorful, with a look that's both functional and pleasing.

— William R. Trotter

There might be more graphically sophisticated role-playing games than *Ragnarok*, from Norsehelm Productions, but none performs faster or are as instantly play-

able. The screen is well-designed, with easily understood icons to one side, and large- and small-scale views occupying the largest portion. Controlling movement and combat is simply a matter of touching the cursor keys.

As its name suggests, the game is set in the richness of Norse mythology (you can gain an incongruent origami skill, but we won't count that). You must quest your way through several levels of Midgard (earth), including Mimer's Realm and Bifrost. By finding a way across Bifrost you can even enter mythical Asgard. The Hades-like Nilfheim is also at your disposal, and here you can help the soul of the great Balder. If gods are your interest, you can aid Thor, Odin, and others, as well as even worry about the evil Loki.

Ragnarok is a big game, yet plays quickly and easily. It's not the fanciest effort around, but in the heat of discovery you won't mind. Unlike many FRPs, it's even worth playing in 15-minute sessions.

Ragnarok is a one-character FRP. You start the game by selecting a class for your character: The Viking is a weapons expert, the Alchemist begins with a collection of potions, and

the fascinating Sage learns to produce and use unique scrolls. Blacksmiths can craft Weaponry, Conjurers are the spellmasters, and the Woodsman is handy with missiles. (Each profession possesses other skills, of course.)

Each character possesses characteristics (strength, magic points, and so forth), as well as certain abilities, powers, and resistances. Among the last is the resistance to petrification, poison, and heat; powers include psionics, terraforming, animation, and dimensional travel. The skills are some of the most unique we've seen in an FRP, ranging from ventriloquism to embalming and slave usage. And when was the last time you saw the skills of fletching, husbandry, and fennling in a game?

Despite its unsophisticated appearance, *Ragnarok* is a rich game. So collapse a few roofs with your disruption horn, climb ice walls with Lazlul's rope, tuck Freyr's magic ship, Skidbladnir, in your back pocket, and head out into the many realms of Midgard. Who knows? Once across the rainbow bridge, you might even wind up with the other heroes in Valhalla.

— Neil Randall

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART STOPS.

MOVING CAN BE SUCH A HARROWING EXPERI-
ENCE. ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU'RE THE SOLE
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THEY HAVE IT THEIR WAY, THIS IS ONE PARTY
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TO 400 TERROR-RID-
DEN ROOMS IN A DES-
PERATE STRUGGLE TO
STAY ALIVE. YOU'LL
ENCOUNTER PUZ-
ZLES, MAGICAL ITEMS, AND FORBIDDEN
BOOKS. AND YOU'LL MEET THE HIDEOUS
HOSTS WHO KNOW WHAT EVIL FORCES ARE
BEHIND THIS NIGHTMARE.

CAN YOU TAKE
THE TENSION? WILL
YOUR MAGIC COMBAT
SKILLS WORK
AGAINST LOATH-
SOME GARGOYLES
OR DEATH LEECHES?

Actual Screen Shots May Vary

WILL YOUR NEW HOUSE DRIVE YOU COM-
PLETELY INSANE?

ALL YOU KNOW IS
THAT TIME IS RUN-
NING OUT. THE
HEAVENS ARE
ALIGNING. AND
THERE'S A LOT OF
HOUSECLEANING
TO BE DONE.

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SPECIAL FORCES

MicroProse is apparently importing this British simulation (developed by **Sleepless Knights**) to replace its own classic *Airborne Ranger*. If so, this is a clear case of new not necessarily being better.

In *Special Forces*, the player controls a squad of four elite warriors (selected from a roster of eight) who undertake an assortment of missions, some calling for stealth and cunning, some for sheer firepower. The four levels of difficulty, along with the number (16) and variety of missions, assure lots of replay value. Graphics throughout are excellent, and the terrain maps are superb.

Once you've selected your drop points, you can issue general orders, set waypoints to your objective, and choose a formation for the squad; the computer will handle firing and movement until you intervene. Under computer control, the team members will react differently depending on whether their overall mode is set for "stealth" (their highest priority will be movement and evasion) or "sniping" (their main goal is engaging the enemy).

You can, of course, also control each team member individually, but it's on this level that *Special Forces* starts to disintegrate. The mouse works only during the set-up screens: Once you enter the drop zone, you must use either keyboard or joystick, and the degree of

control is decidedly rough in both modes.

Graphic depiction of combat, the heart of any small-unit tactical game, is a vast disappointment — little more, in fact, than a very clumsy arcade sequence. Rather than reacting when hit, enemy soldiers simply fade to nothingness, leaving no remains. On the whole, there's little here to distinguish this part of *Special Forces* from the average Nintendo shoot-em-up.

But any pretensions to realism are lost back at the weapons selection menu. Only eight pieces of ordnance are available; both the selection and the manual's descriptions are weird beyond belief. The 9 mm Browning automatic, for example, is described as a "sniping pistol," an oxymoron if ever there was one. You're given the option of carrying 40mm grenades, but *no grenade launcher* (these guys must have terrific throwing arms!). Finally, no contemporary soldier, "elite" or otherwise, would go into combat carrying a bolt-action 1918 Lee-Enfield rifle — yet it's the only long-range weapon offered.

If you're looking for small-unit action, try *Airborne Ranger* or Interstel's *D.R.A.G.O.N. Force*, a crude but two-fisted battle game that gives you a chance to exercise realistic tactics.

— *William R. Trotter*

COMPOSER QUEST

Remember those "study aids" that were so popular in high school? You know the ones — they carried a universally ignored warning to the student that the notes were only supposed to *supplement* the actual text, never to substitute it.

Composer Quest, from **Dr. T's Music Software**, is basically a study aid to the history of music and its relationship to art and civilization between 1600 and 1940. With CD-audio quality music, great graphics, and a very simple and logical interface, *Composer's Quest* is a far cry from being a PC Cliff's Notes on the fine arts. Nonetheless, *Composer Quest* is still merely a synopsis of music and history, serving only as a starting point for further study and listening.

Composer Quest is essentially an overview of classical and jazz music and 32 significant composers. After selecting a musical period on the Time Line, you can begin learning more about the composers within that era. On the same menu, you can access contemporary world news, read about important artists, view digitized images of notable works of art, and learn about the philosophies of that time period, all of which give you a sense of con-

text to better understand the composer's works.

A short biography and samples of music from the composer's most-celebrated pieces are provided. Music novices may require an explanation for some of the terminology (madrigal, for example); you can access a definition for these "hotwords" with a simple point and click.

Your learning is reinforced with ten-question quizzes about each time period and, after you've played a while, a "Name That Tune" game. After listening to a melody, you travel back in time, find the composer, and identify the composition. In concept, *Composer Quest* aims to teach you about music, art, and world history while entertaining. But in reality it's quite limited, because once you've learned about the 32 composers, there's not much left to do.

The music samples are only 30 seconds long, and with the exception of "The Entertainer" by Scott Joplin there's no music provided for modern composers; consequently, there's no "Name That Tune" game for modern music. After familiarizing yourself with the 66 30-second audio-bites (which are, for all practical purposes, the "Top 40" of classical music), the actual game is hardly challenging.

— *Pamela Yee*

Before you play Special Forces, you'd better put on your game face.

When your drop-point is smack in the middle of fierce enemy forces, you'd better dress for the occasion.

That's why, in *Special Forces*, you're equipped with high-powered rockets. Rapid-fire pistols. Rifles. Grenades. And whatever it takes to secure your objective quickly.

Your objective? Today it could be rescuing a POW. Tomorrow, sabotage or cutting off enemy supply lines.

But you can't do it all alone. So take along your pick of the military's elite commandos to help you. Specialists who'll have creating diversions, sniping, setting off explosives, jumping enemies, and carrying out your master strategy.

Special Forces from MicroProse. Defeat is not an option. What you wear is up to you.

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PHILIPPINE ISLANDS & ANTARCTICA SCENARIO DISK FOR GUNSHIP 2000

FLOOR 13

This extensive add-on disk for what is arguably the best helicopter flight simulation on the market is a true gem. Not only have two new fields of battle been added, but the old scenarios have been given new twists, the entire program has been overhauled, and a slick new mission builder is included to boot.

Gunship 2000 put you in control of a series of high-tech helicopters, flying either solo or in a five-man assault force. Scenarios and campaigns in the Persian Gulf and Central Europe offered a seemingly endless combination of missions, and now players can fly in Antarctica or the Philippines.

The endless barren whites of the Antarctic are leagues away from the tropical jungles of the Philippines, and each area presents new problems. Faced off against Argentine forces on the frozen continent, the gunship teams have to contend with an almost completely featureless landscape, making contour flying difficult. Add to that deadly icebergs on strikes against naval targets and whiteouts which can smother your birds at any time, and it's easy to see why you have your hands

full. There isn't much to look at in the icy wasteland, but then that's part of the challenge.

Navigating the jungles of the Philippines presents its own set of difficulties. As you hammer at communist insurgents spread across two islands and a narrow channel, you'll find yourself forced to make some pretty quick maneuvers. Surprisingly, flying these jungles is not unlike flying the urban missions this disk adds to the Central European scenario: Maneuvering through the concrete canyons require moderate speed and quick reflexes. Enemies lay in wait around every corner, and a gentle touch is the surest way to get out of the city alive.

As if all this weren't enough, there's also an easy-to-use mission builder included, allowing pilots of sufficient rank to create dream scenarios in any field of combat. Even players usually intimidated by mission builders will find this one a snap. Place each unit yourself, or just select "fill" after designating the strike points and the computer does the rest: it's the best way to get the kind of missions you enjoy most.

— T. Liam McDonald

This **Virgin** game is for anyone who ever believed a shadow government lurked behind the headlines. From a secret enclave that doesn't officially exist, the new Director General of a nameless branch of the British government keeps track of incoming intelligence, deciding who lives, who dies, and who gets their reputation shattered.

That new Director General just happens to be you, and as reports of various suspects and "enemy" groups filter in, you can have people followed, their homes and businesses searched, their phones tapped, or even have them picked up for interrogation. The intelligence you gather points to all kinds of sordid plots, conspiracies, and affairs; it's up to you to decide the best way to head off scandal and subterfuge. Your competence, or lack thereof, is reflected in the national opinion polls, where you try to keep the government's favorable rating higher than the "opposition." Fall too far behind, and you'll find yourself out of a job — and flying out of your 13th-floor window.

It's an interesting concept, but one that's compromised by a poor presentation. All your time is spent switching between

completely static monochrome VGA screens, reading reports that come across your desk. The interface also leaves a lot to be desired: You make assignments and read reports by hitting the number key corresponding to the action you want to take. This format practically screams for a mouse, but the game doesn't support one.

There's a certain amount of black (and fairly forced) humor, mostly in the outlandish scandals your own people cook up to smear the names of opposition leaders ("prominent businessman found in hotel room with sheep" is pretty typical). But for the most part *Floor 13* is so deadpan it's catatonic. By the time you figure out what's going on, it's almost always too late to deal with the situation.
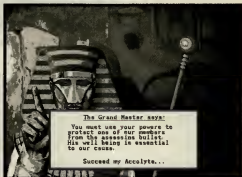
After several games, however, you might know what to do to head off trouble, since you wind up seeing many of the same stories again and again. This in itself is a mystery the Director General might want to investigate — *Floor 13* needs almost four megs of your hard drive. If that space isn't being used for elaborate plotlines and graphic screens, what's taking up all the room?

— Jeff Lundrigan

It makes J-8s cry and MiGs fighting mad.

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Actual screen shown

Actual screens may vary

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RED BARON MISSION BUILDER

Despite being released over two years ago, *Red Baron* is still regarded as the finest WWI air-combat simulation on the market, a position which is further solidified with the release of *Red Baron Mission Builder*. **Dynamix**'s first add-on disk for *Red Baron* boasts all the features needed to give new life to a classic game.

Players who've exhausted *Red Baron*'s extensive lineup of planes will welcome the addition of several new craft. While most of these new planes didn't take a leading role during the war, they do bring an even

greater scope to the simulation. The Halberstadt D.II is a good mount for missions against early Nieuports and Spads, while the light construction of the Fokker D.VIII makes it nearly as deadly to its pilot as to the enemy. Also included are the Nieuport 11, Nieuport 28, and Siemens-Schuckert D.III, probably the most exciting of the five new planes.

Along with the new planes are new aces to duel. Though names like Degelow, MacLaren, Dallas, and von Schleich aren't immediately recognizable to many, these guys aren't chopped liver by any means. And like the new planes, they serve to add more breadth to the game.

Mission Builder also affects some operating parameters: It

makes it possible to use the plus and minus keys or numeric keys to control throttle, and gives you the option to restart a mission rather than kicking back to a menu.

But unquestionably the most exciting feature is the one from which this add-on product derives its name. *Mission Builder* allows you create custom missions involving fighters, bombers, zeppelins, and barrage balloons, with a wide variety of targets including aerodromes, supply dumps, zeppelins, factories, balloons, train stations, and (of course) enemy fighter patrols.

One big advantage to a custom mission is that the action starts when *you* want it to — no more long flights before encountering enemies or reaching your target. And *Mission Builder* makes "dream" dogfights possible: On my first custom mission I flew bomber escort with Frank Luke, Albert Ball, and Charles Nungesser at my side; Richthofen, Goering, Boelcke, and Degelow met us as we neared the target.

There are, of course, limits to what you can do. Memory limits mean that you can't create a mission with, say, 8 Allied and 8 German planes mixing it up (ten planes seems to be the maximun). Nevertheless, *Red Baron* fans will consider *Mission Builder* a must.

— Stephen Poole

GRAND SLAM BRIDGE II

Six years after the best-selling bridge program *Grand Slam Bridge* was released, **Electronic Arts** updates graphics and game play with *Grand Slam II*. Unfortunately, the company may have sacrificed efficient game play for a pair of digitized forearms.

Grand Slam II certainly has everything a bridge player wants. The point-and-click bidding system is a breeze to use, and if you make a mistake — or even if you've finished playing the hand — you can rebid. You can save those beautiful grand-slam hands to gloat over later, or you can create your own hands. The game adjusts well to players of all skill levels, from beginner to contract player. And if you're a novice or just trying out one of *Grand Slam II*'s bidding conventions, the program features tips and advice on your game.

Grand Slam II has some frills most bridge programs overlook. It recognizes 100 and 150 honors; offers right- and left-handed displays; gives you a variety of bidding options, such as weak two-bid, five-card major, or unusual 2 NT. You can

also play cutthroat bridge by adjusting the aggressiveness of your teams' bidding.

However, as nice as the 256-color graphics and tinkling Mozart music is to watch and listen to, these features seem to cause unrealistic — and surprising — game delays. On a 386SX running at 20 MHz, the play is leisurely; on a 286, it's nearly dead in the water. You can choose a non-graphic display to speed things up (showing just the card indications: AK1072, for example) but it's compatible only with the keyboard.

Grand Slam II is a very nice

program — very nice indeed. There's probably not another bridge game on the market with as many customizing options. Just be sure you've got enough horsepower to handle it.

— Leslie Mizell

POWER POLITICS

Cineplay's *Power Politics* for Windows is the perfect game for those of us who actually *enjoy* the political process. *Power Politics* lets you manage the campaign of any Democratic, Republican, or Independent candidate for the Presidency since 1960. You also have the options of creating your own candidates, or running contenders who never secured their party's nomination — such as John Glenn, Pat Robertson, Mario Cuomo, and even David Duke. Perhaps most fascinating of all, you can pit candidates past and present in a sort of "All-Stars" race for the White House.

The bulk of *Power Politics* stresses the actual, day-to-day management of a candidate's campaign. You call the shots on everything, from which state your candidate will visit each day to what issues he'll face and how often he'll debate. You also control the candidate's advertising budget — one of the most powerful tools in the game. You can run national spots highlighting your candidate's character and record, or attack your opponents' abilities. You even have the option of running state- and city-level ads designed to swing key undecided states or soften up an opponent's lead.

Although *Power Politics* focuses more on the strategic aspects of campaigning than on the specifics of a candidate's platform and policies, policy issues do come into play. The presidential hopefuls are rated, from right-wing to very liberal, on a number of issues, and each of the 50 states is similarly rated. By matching your candidate's stand on the issues with the sentiment in the state where he's campaigning, you maximize your man's (or woman's) appeal.

The mood of the nation itself can be gauged through polls that determine which issues are most important to the voters of a given state. To give some context to the poll results, *Power Politics* places all elections, whether historical or fanciful, in the 1992 political arena.

This rigidity of historical background can be a real weakness. It often leads to some strange — some might even say impossible — results. An incumbent Ronald Reagan, for example, is handicapped by the same weak economy that cost George Bush a second term. Against a fairly charismatic Democrat, he'll face an up-hill battle for reelection.

But *Power Politics* is more remarkable for the things it does right than the things it doesn't. Its attention to detail and the wealth of information it provides make for a solid, enjoyable exercise in national politics.

— *Matthew A. Firme*

LINKS 386 Pro
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The new *LINKS 386 Pro*, featuring Harbour Town Golf Links, is the first golf game specifically designed for the graphic capabilities and computing power of your personal 386/486 computer system. SUPER VGA 256-color graphics at 640x400 resolution display breathtaking views of LINKS Championship Courses. Your friends won't believe that your computer looks so good!

Texturing of fairways, rough, sand, and other surfaces adds an extra level of realism.

A lot of listening went into LINKS 386 Pro.

Many of the new features and improvements were added in response to direct requests from LINKS users like you! An exciting new feature is our Unique Computer Opponent. Play a round of golf and save your game. The new *LINKS 386 Pro* recorded every shot you made. Send your game off to your buddy and he can play against you right on the screen, shot for shot, as if you were right there next to him! We've also included pre-recorded games from worthy opponents, statistics, a variety of game play modes and much, much more.

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You can use any of the 7 existing LINKS courses or upgrade your favorite course to the Super VGA version.

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With the new *LINKS 386 Pro* you're not stuck with just one standard viewing window. With a few clicks of your mouse you can split the screen giving you a real-time reverse view of your shot to the green or add a scaleable top-view that displays the flight of your ball. Scorecard, club distance chart, terrain profile and other panels give you the flexibility to display what you want to view while playing and you can change your viewing setup at anytime!

*Actual Links 386 Pro Super VGA Screens

TAKE-A-BREAK! CROSSWORDS

Sierra has adopted a winning concept in its new *Take-A-Break!* series of Windows-based games. The idea is to have a few entertaining and relaxing diversions on your hard drive which you can pick up and put down quickly and easily.

After spending hours finishing a report or working on a spreadsheet, who hasn't wanted to kick back for a few minutes with a quick game or two? That's one of the reasons Microsoft placed *Solitaire* and *Minesweeper* in Windows, and the Take-A-Break series is based on the same concept.

Crosswords is basically the classic paper-and-pencil word game that has addicted millions of people since its creation in 1913 for *The New York World* newspaper. Featuring 375 different puzzles, the new Sierra game includes multimedia bells and whistles such as digitized voice, a musical score, sound effects, and animations. And it also adds several game-play features that make playing on a computer easy and quick: an "autocheck"

option to tell you immediately if a word is right or wrong, highlighted rows and columns that help you keep your place, and automatic letter-advance when you're typing in answers.

Crosswords is packed with customizing options. There are three skill levels, including Apprentice (hints and autocheck are available), Puzzler (hints are not an option), and Fanatic (hints and autocheck are not available). Difficulty levels are Easy, Medium, and Hard, and puzzles range in size from 13x13 to 19x19.

All of the puzzles are from the massive Dell Magazines puzzle library, and the game includes a basic digest-sized Dell crosswords dictionary.

The strangest thing about the game is Wanda the Word Fairy, a blonde nymph who

stares out from a small window, watching every move of the mouse. When you complete a puzzle, Wanda flies around the screen, congratulating you on your success. It's amusing at first, but purists will probably choose the option to get rid of Wanda.

Crosswords requires a 286 or better with a minimum of 2 megs of RAM. Players with high-end machines can enjoy the music and animations; if you have a less robust computer you can eliminate the extras and still enjoy the puzzles. And if you start a puzzle but want to finish it when you don't have access to a PC, you can print out the puzzles on any printer and solve them the old-fashioned way.

— Selby Bateman

Like it or not, the postponement of projected release dates has become almost standard operating procedure for PC game publishers. The reasons are numerous: Maybe an unexpected hardware compatibility problem is discovered as the game is about to go to production, or a legal tangle slows down a licensing agreement. New technology may become available during the development process which designers can't wait to exploit. Then there's always the wearisome task of locating and fixing bugs and glitches — and with the size and complexity of today's cutting-edge software, programmers can spend weeks and weeks tracking down bugs and *still* not find them all.

The delays are even more noticeable when the advertising campaign kicks into high gear as soon as the scheduled release date of an upcoming title

is divulged. Ask the people at **Origin**. They didn't just announce the late 1991 release of *Strike Commander*, from *Wing Commander* wunderkind Chris Roberts; in concert with Roberts' notion of games as "interactive cinema," they created an ad and poster — similar to the sort you'd expect for a movie — which carried the enticing words, "The assault begins Christmas 1991." *Wing Commander* enthusiasts were beside themselves: *Strike Commander* would come hot on the heels of *Wing II*, and from all indications it appeared to represent a generational leap over the already impressive technology of *Wing Commander.*

Gamers couldn't wait to hop into the cockpit of an F-16 and enter the richly textured *Strike Commander* world. But

wait they did, for over a year — and now their patience is about to be rewarded. With *Strike Commander* firmly slated for a first-quarter '93 release (most likely February), gamers will finally get to see what a difference a year makes.

We took a trip to Origin's Austin, Texas headquarters to talk with Chris Roberts and get a closeup look at the latest incarnation of *Strike Commander.* After slipping into the cockpit and heading out on some ground-strike missions, we're happy to report that *Strike Commander*, like many of the finer things in life, was worth waiting for.

FULFILLING THE WING COMMANDER PROMISE

It's not surprising that the *Strike Commander* saga is inextricably linked to the Wing Commander games. For Roberts, his latest and most massive project is nothing less than the culmination of the technology and gaming concepts that he first introduced in his best-selling Wing Commander series.

"I believe the more you get a player involved in a game, just like a person watching a movie, the more he becomes involved with the characters — and the more he gets sucked into the fantasy," says Roberts. The original *Wing Commander* was the first step toward the realization of that goal. With that effort, he created what *PC Entertainment* columnist William R. Trotter called "the closest thing yet to a genuine interactive movie for your PC."

Set during a galactic conflict between humans and a catlike race known as the Kilrathi, *Wing Commander* combined cinematic sequences with some of the most intense dogfights ever fought on a computer. Thousands of players fell under the *Wing Commander* spell, and eagerly snapped up *Wing Commander II: Vengeance of the Kilrathi.*

The outer-space dogfights in the sequel were just as intense as those in *Wing I,* and the storyline was much more expansive, with extensive cinematic sequences revealing a complicated subplot woven into the story of the war. But because there was no true interaction between missions — the story merely unfolds with no input from the player — Roberts felt that *Wing II,* though undeniably dazzling in many respects, didn't succeed in bringing the player completely into the game environment.

Determined that *Strike Commander* would have the sort of interaction needed to truly captivate the player, Roberts took all the lessons he'd learned from the Wing Commander games and set out to create the

most intriguing, inviting, and believable game world possible — and he's succeeded.

LABOR OF LOVE

One of the reasons that *Strike Commander* truly qualifies as "interactive cinema" is its design. In *Wing Commander,* player interaction was limited to flying missions and chatting with crew members in the lounge; players had even less

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STEPHEN POOLE

RIGIN'S NEW

input in *Wing II. Strike Commander,* however, requires the player to become involved on multiple levels, all of which work to "suck the player into the fantasy."

Strike Commander is set in the year 2011. Instead of the much-ballyhooed "New World Order" that leaders spoke of in the late 20th century, the global political community is a shambles. The U.S. is a nation in name only, as state after state has seceded in the face of astronomical taxes. And as countries across the globe fall victim to rising debt and oil shortages, multi-national corporations have stepped forward to assume the role of geopolitical movers and shakers.

You are a pilot flying in "Stern's Wildcats," an elite squadron of mercenaries led by James Stern. As second-in-command, it's up to you to

The musical score is the final, crowning touch. Origin's FX system, which utilizes an orchestral soundtrack to aurally reflect the on-screen action, first debuted in *Wing Commander*. But the entire process has been vastly improved: The segues between the various musical motifs during combat are smoother and faster than ever before, and the international scope of the game is wonderfully represented by composer

STRIKE COMMANDER:
EPIC TAKES TO THE SKIES

make tough decisions — fiscal, strategic, and moral — that determine the fate of the squad. It's your duty to travel to the mercenary market to locate new assignments for the squadron. Succeed in your mission objectives, and you'll have the cash to upgrade your

aircraft and ordnance; fail, and the task of keeping the squadron together and flying becomes increasingly difficult.

It's your call as to what weapons load you'll carry on each strike; and your decide whether to take on a particular mission. As in the Wing Commander games, your teammates encompass a wide variety of personalities — some friendly, some troubled, some selfish and vainglorious. But in *Strike Commander* you take an active role interacting with these characters, and your behavior toward them affects the way they deal with you in the future. It's an excellent design, a delicate blend of role playing, graphic adventure, and flight simulation.

After working on the Wing Commander games, Roberts and company felt very comfortable with the tools they used to create *Strike Commander*, allowing them to focus more on plot and character development and less on implementing their ideas. New 3-D modeling software was used to give the cinematic cutaways an uncanny photo-realistic look, and improved data compression techniques mean that *Strike Commander* features an incredibly large and detailed game world.

Dana Glover's rich, evocative themes.

GETTING IT RIGHT

At the core of this movielike presentation, however, is a state-of-the-art jet-combat simulation. And making sure that this aspect of *Strike Commander* was every bit as good as any other flight-sim on the market was a significant reason for the delayed release.

With the Wing Commander series, Roberts didn't have to worry about the effects of things like wind and gravity on ship performance. And because those games simulated the experience of flying spacecraft which don't exist, there was no need (or way) to design "accurate" flight models.

But in *Strike Commander*, you start out flying an F-16 Falcon, and move on to an F-22. Coming down to earth after the freedom of outer-space combat, says Roberts, "was the biggest single pain in the neck of the entire project. I think you could ask anybody on the team,

'Would you want to simulate reality for your next game?' and they'd say no."

It may have meant extra work, but once the decision to do an F-16 simulation was made the Origin team threw themselves headlong into the task. Roberts knew there was some pretty stout competition in the flight-sim market, and devoted as much time as was needed to make sure that *Strike Commander*'s flight model and cockpit layout were realistic. F-16 pilots were called in to verify the accuracy of the flight model, as well as the HUD. As Roberts proudly points out, "We spent so much time and attention getting our flight models right, because we want our flight models to be at least as good as anyone else's — we wanted to let you do on a PC everything you could do in an F-16, down to the last detail."

But Roberts also realized that the reason the Wing Commander games appealed to such a broad spectrum of players was its simple interface. Consequently, the goal

of the *Strike Commander* team "was to make *Strike Commander* as realistic as, say, a *Falcon 3.0*, and then layer on top of that realism a lot of friendly features to make *Strike Commander* a lot easier to fly." And it worked: if you've played *Wing Commander*, you'll get airborne with *Strike Commander* immediately. Many controls remain unchanged from *Wing Commander* — W to cycle through weap-

ons, T to target enemies, A to activate autopilot (available for takeoffs and landings), and so forth.

One drawback to simulating jet combat is that kills often take place at great distances, meaning there's little or no traditional dogfighting — and that's the favorite part of air-combat sims for many players. But the economic restraints you must work under in *Strike Commander* mean you'll be forced to rely on cheap missiles or the trusty Vulcan cannon, which in turn means classic twisting and turning dogfights. Sure, you'll still make some long-range kills, but multiple viewing angles and the closeup perspective of the gun camera will let you appreciate your handiwork even when you smoke a foe at a distance.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

You're probably wondering, "How does it *look*?" Thanks to Origin's RealSpace 3-D technology, *Strike Commander* boasts some of the most convincing graphics and animation ever seen in a flight simulator. Combining 3-D bitmapped graphics, texture-mapped and shaded

which require you to hit different keys to access various cockpit perspectives, *Strike Commander* allows you to smoothly rotate your view, just as a real pilot would do. It's a vast improvement over any previous flight-sim, and adds greatly to the illusion of actually being in the pilot's seat.

The thousands of man-hours that went into making *Strike Commander* the most realistic flight-sim ever may have delayed the game's release, but it looks as though it was still time well spent for Origin. "We're going to use the technology from *Strike Commander* for *Wing Commander III*," says Roberts. "All the ships will have the burn marks, textures, and all the detail they had before, but the animation will be a lot smoother. And you can get up close and personal without seeing huge pixels like you saw
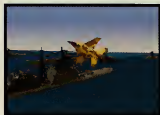
in *Wing Commander* and *Wing Commander II*."

To bring all this action to life, you'll need a fairly powerful computer: a 386/25 with 4 megs of RAM will do nicely, but like other high-end simulations *Strike Commander* achieves its greatest realism on a 486. The minimum hardware platform is a fast 386/SX, and while that configuration may require you to lower some of the detail to achieve satisfying animation, Roberts points out that players unaccustomed to playing flight-sims on a high-end machine will still be impressed: "If you don't know what it's like to drive a Ferrari — let's say you've been driving a Volkswagen all your life — *Strike Commander* would be like the best damn Volkswagen you've ever driven."

Waiting these many months to become immersed in Chris Roberts' latest masterpiece has been frustrating. Now, however, gamers will learn a lesson that the people at Origin already knew: patience is indeed a virtue.

GP

RAM *Session*

Tim Victor

A As PCs have become more sophisticated, a category of software has become increasingly important: utility programs that can raise a computer's performance to even higher levels by fully utilizing extra memory and maximizing processing speeds. Memory managers are needed to make the most of a PC's memory, disk-cache utilities make many programs run faster, and disk compression software increases the amount of available space on a hard disk.

Unfortunately, software alone won't turn a clunker of a PC into a hot rod; in fact, the PCs that will benefit most from these utilities are probably the most powerful ones to begin with. But whatever type of PC you have, knowing how to use the most popular types of performance enhancers can help you get the most out of it.

Memory Managers

There are two advantages to using memory-management utilities. First, a memory manager can increase the amount of available *conventional memory*, the first 640 kilobytes of RAM. Conventional memory is one of the scarcest resources in today's PCs—it's needed by

DOS, device drivers and resident utilities, and applications, all of which compete for those precious 640 kilobytes. If your computer has 640KB of RAM or more, yet you receive a message saying "Not enough memory" when you try to run a program, you've run out of conventional memory.

Most programs can now make use of memory beyond that first 640KB, but they need some sort of a memory manager to make the extra RAM available, either as *expanded* (EMS) or *extended* (XMS) memory. (For an explanation of the various types of memory in a PC, see "A Guide to PC Memory.")

If you have MS-DOS 5.0,

you already have a pretty good two-piece set of memory management drivers, **HIMEM.SYS** and **EMM386.EXE.** The first of these is an XMS memory manager, making extended memory available to programs. EMM386.EXE, which only works with 386 and 486 PCs, serves two functions: it can emulate expanded memory for the many programs supporting the EMS standard, and it can create *upper memory blocks* (UMB) where device drivers can be loaded instead of taking up that precious conventional memory.

HIMEM.SYS and EMM 386.SYS work well enough for most folks, but demanding users might want a more sophisticated memory manager like **QEMM-386**, from Quarterdeck Office Systems, or **386Max**, from Qualitas. Both of these third-party managers come with excellent manuals, boast strong support from their publishers, and feature an impressive array of tricks for detecting unused high DOS addresses and turning them into UMBs, yielding more free memory. They even include tools to automatically reconfigure your system's memory management, QEMM's **Opti-**

mize and 386Max's **Maximize.**

The differences between the two utilities are minor. They're both well-regarded, and are considerably more powerful than the DOS 5.0 utilities. The biggest distinction seems to be the type of users that each attracts. QEMM-386 courts the "power user's power user." The tersely worded manual spares no details, and the program sports a huge array of features and switches, guaranteeing maximum available memory. By comparison, 386Max is a kinder, gentler program. It might yield slightly less memory than QEMM-386 in the most demanding situations, but its designers seem to have placed a higher value on reliability and ease-of-use.

Disk Caches

For programs that access disk files often, the speed of disk operations can be more important than CPU performance. The best way to speed up disk access is usually a *disk cache* utility, setting aside some of the PC's RAM (whether conventional, EMS, or XMS memory) to hold the most frequently needed data from the disk. Since programs often access the same block of data more than once,

A GUIDE TO PC MEMORY

t here are several types of memory in a modern PC, but when "memory" is used generically, it usually means *Random Access Memory (RAM)*, the chips that store a running program and its data. Current PC's typically have from 1 to 8 megabytes of RAM.

Without belaboring a topic that most readers already understand, it's worth mentioning that computer memory is measured in *bytes*, where one byte can hold one character in a text file or one short instruction in a program. Larger blocks of memory are measured in *kilobytes (KB)*, with 1024 bytes to the kilobyte, and *megabytes (MB)*, where one megabyte equals

1024KB or 1048576 bytes. The PC has a unique identifying number, or *address*, for each byte of memory.

Most PC users have heard of the infamous "640KB barrier." The MS-DOS operating system (and PCs themselves) are still limited by the design of the first IBM PCs of 10 years ago, which only provided addresses for 1 megabyte of any sort of memory, the first 640KB of which could be RAM. In current usage, the 640KB range containing RAM is called conventional memory, or the low DOS area. The upper 384KB block, called *system memory*, *upper memory*, or the *high DOS area*, normally addresses a PC's *ROM (Read-Only Memory)*, as well as RAM or ROM chips contained by cards in the PC's expansion slots.

cache utilities usually hang onto the most recently used data. The copy kept in RAM can then be read as much as a hundred times faster than the data on the hard disk.

A disk cache's performance depends on both the amount of RAM given to it and on the speed of that RAM. Conventional RAM offers the highest speed, but it's badly needed for other purposes. That leaves EMS and XMS memory to choose from (XMS is the better choice if you have some available). Even a PC with 1 meg of RAM will probably benefit from a disk cache, using 128 or 256KB of spare RAM. For systems with more memory, a cache of 1 megabyte or more is common.

A disk cache can also use a technique called *delayed writing* to accelerate operations that write to disk. Once the data has been copied into cache mem-

ory, an application can immediately return to its business while the caching software quietly finishes the write operation.

Delayed writing is controversial. Critics point out that cached data will be lost if the computer crashes while it's being written, maybe even corrupting data already on the disk. But delayed writing rewards minor risk-taking with very real performance gains. Data can be lost during any disk-write operation, cached or not, but the cached data gets written out very quickly, so the extra risk is really pretty small. In any case, millions of users are already taking this chance, since Microsoft's **SmartDrive** cache (included with both DOS 5.0

A DISK CACHE'S PERFORMANCE DEPENDS ON BOTH THE AMOUNT OF RAM GIVEN TO IT AND ON THE SPEED OF THAT RAM.

and Windows) can delay write operations as much as five seconds, apparently without ill results.

SmartDrive might be the best value in disk cache software. Of its several versions, the latest and greatest is version 4.0, included with Windows 3.1 and easily distinguished from earlier versions since it's named SMART-DRV.EXE rather than SMART-DRV.SYS. Although it comes with Windows, it also works in DOS-only machines, even with older pre-5.0 versions of DOS.

SmartDrive's performance is quite competitive with other cache utilities, but like so much

of Microsoft's system software, the Windows and DOS manuals really don't do it justice. There are plenty of books on the market with more information about SmartDrive, but at

$25 or more per title, that might make it a bit less of a bargain.

PC utility packages often include full-featured disk caching software like NCache, part of Symantec's **Norton Desktop** and **Norton Utilities** ensembles, and **PC-Cache**, Central Point Software's offering in their **PC Tools** package. **Super PC-Kwik** is another highly regarded cache program, part of the **Power Pak** bundle from PC-Kwik (formerly Multisoft). Compared to SmartDrive, these caches offer more configuration options and much better documentation, and the other utilities in the packages add to their value.

Disk Compression

While disk caches increase the apparent speed of hard disks, another type of utility increases their apparent size. Disk compression software, like Stac Electronics' **Stacker 3.0** and AddStor's **SuperStor 2.0**, uses data-compression algorithms to store files more efficiently, fitting more data on a given amount of disk space. A computer file usually has some amount of *redundancy*, patterns of data that repeat or are predictable in some way. Disk compression utilities identify these patterns and cleverly recode the data, often repre-

PC memory address space, showing conventional, system, and extended (XMS) memory areas.

READ-ONLY MEMORY (BIOS)

UNUSED

UNUSED

16 KB EMS PAGES

EMS PAGE FRAME

VIDEO DISPLAY MEMORY

XXX MB EXTENDED MEMORY AREA

384 KB SYSTEM AREA

640 KB CONVENTIONAL MEMORY AREA (RAM)

System address space (High DOS), showing expanded (EMS) memory areas.
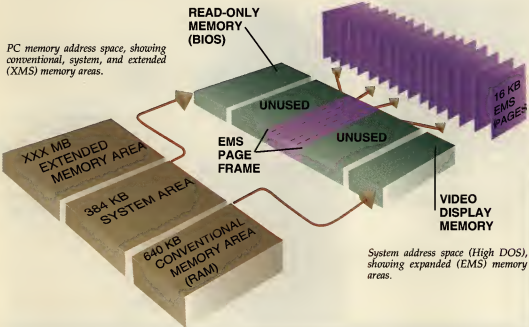
PC users escaped the 640KB limit with memory boards conforming to the Expanded Memory Specification (EMS). Because of the IBM PC's 1MB address space, EMS memory is accessed through a 64KB *page frame* located in the system memory area. Four different *pages* — 16KB blocks of EMS memory — are available to the program at a time. Applications must be specially written to use this memory, allocating EMS pages and mapping them into and out of the page frame as needed.

EMS memory is widely used by DOS applications, including most popular spreadsheets and word processors. PCs with 386 or 486 processors can even provide EMS memory without

an add-in board, using an Extended Memory Manager like EMM386.

The IBM PC/AT was the first PC to offer extended memory, RAM located above the first megabyte of addresses, but standard DOS programs had no way to use this RAM until the Extended Memory Standard (XMS) arrived several years later. XMS memory is currently well-supported by Windows and is also used by some newer DOS applications but, unlike EMS, it requires a 286 processor or better.

The XMS specification also defines the term Upper Memory Blocks (UMB), referring to RAM accessed in the upper DOS address range between 640KB and 1MB. Other than the EMS

senting the same information in half the space — a 2:1 *compression ratio* — or less.

Data compression techniques aren't unique to these utilities. PC backup programs like Central Point Software's **PC-Backup** and Symantec's **Norton Backup** also employ data compression to fit backed-up data on fewer floppies or tapes. (Both contain compression code licensed from the makers of Stacker.) BBS users are also familiar with archiving programs like PKWARE's **PKZIP**, which employs similar techniques to reduce the size of downloaded files.

What makes disk-doublers like Stacker and SuperStor special is *on-the-fly compression*: the data compression (and *expansion*, the reverse operation) happens automatically whenever any program reads or writes a file. Other utilities reduce the size of individual files (which are then readable only by that program), but disk-doublers compress entire disks, and then do a pretty good job of hiding their magic from the rest of the software on the PC. As long as the utility's device driver is loaded into memory, most standard DOS programs can perform normal reads and writes on the compressed disk.

While the device drivers are kept as small as possible, they still take up valuable conventional memory. With a memory manager like EMM386, the driver can be loaded into a UMB in high memory, but either way it might be a problem. A program which requires a lot of free conventional memory might not be able to co-exist with the driver, or it might be incompatible with the memory manager; game programs may well be the worst troublemak-

ers in both respects.

Stacker and SuperStor are both popular, reliable, well thought-out products. They offer very real benefits, but not all users will want to deal with the extra complexity they add. They may not be for everyone, but the technology is definitely here to stay. The compression utilities are especially attractive when there's no way to upgrade a PC's disk, the case with many laptop and notebook computers. They're also a practical, low-priced way to forestall an inevitable hard disk upgrade,

but at some additional cost in lost ease-of-use.

Practical Issues

There are a couple of simple rules to remember when using utility software to optimize your PC. First of all, remember what you're trying to fix and know when you've fixed it. For instance, 600KB of free conventional memory will be enough for most programs.

When you've spent a lot of time installing a utility or making changes, it's natural to think the system "feels better." Diag-

nostic programs can make that assessment more objective, including DOS 5.0's **MEM** command, free alternatives like **ASQ** and **PMAP**, and benchmark programs that measure the performance of a cached disk.

Also, remember that something is often much better than nothing. If you're not using DOS 5.0 utilities like EMM386 and SMARTDRV, give them a try. They might be all you need.

GP

We, the peop[le] of the United Sta[tes,] in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, and promote tranquility, provide...

Active Hard Disk

| Now is the time for all good people to come... |
| Four score and seven years ago, our fathers... |
| The quick brown fox jumped over the sleep-... |
| When in the course of human events, it be... |

CACHE MEMORY

How disk caches work: when disk data is first read, a copy is saved in disk cache memory.

Inactive Hard Disk

| Now is the time for all good people to come... |
| Four score and seven years ago, our fathers... |
| The quick brown fox jumped over the sleep-... |
| When in the course of human events, it be... |

CACHE MEMORY

If the same data is needed again, it can be read much more quickly from cache memory.

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page frame, the only RAM normally found in this range is display memory on a video card. With the right memory manager, a UMB can be used in place of scarce conventional memory.

UMBs are created in one of three ways. Most often, a utility controls the memory-paging circuitry built into 386 and 486 CPUs, so that memory operations in the high DOS area actually access extended memory. 286 CPUs lack such sophisticated memory paging, but some 286 PC motherboards can do the same sleight-of-hand, namely those built around the NEAT chipset from Chips & Technologies. (A PC with this chipset usually displays the NEAT trademark on the screen when you turn it on.) Finally, an EMS-compatible memory board can create UMBs in any PC, under control of a memory manager

that controls the board's page frame hardware.

Many resident programs and device drivers automatically load themselves into an available UMB, freeing up the conventional memory they would otherwise occupy. Others can often be placed there using DOS 5.0's **LOADHIGH** and **DEVICEHIGH=** commands.

In the world of PC entertainment software, games are just beginning to fully capitalize on the world beyond 640K, and those that use additional RAM are more likely to use extended memory than expanded.

— Tim Victor

WING COMMANDER®

PRIVATEER™

n 2670, the Terran
Confederation and
Kilrathi Empire are still
at war.

To some, the conflict
means death, slavery or
dishonor.

To others, it's the chance
to make a fat living.

ALTERNATE LIVES

MIGHT AND MAGIC: CLOUDS OF XEEN

NEIL RANDALL

The guiding principle behind *New World Computing's* design of *Clouds of Xeen* is ease of play. Unlike many role-playing adventures on the shelves these days, *Xeen* requires only that you jump in and do what you must to survive. The game opens with a couple of battles to get your feet wet, and then you're off to a tent to find out what you're supposed to be accomplishing. After that, things gradually become more complex, but never *so* complex that you feel like giving things up for lost.

Simply put, *Clouds of Xeen* is an addictive game, the sort that you might feel like loading up and playing for a half-hour or so before bed. Like some of the great arcade designs in computer game history, *Xeen* is relaxing, its only anxiety-producing effect being that you'll want to return to it to get past the next barrier. Don't get the wrong impression; *Xeen* is by no means too simplistic for those who want complexity and difficulty in an FRP. The point is that *Xeen* is a *game*, not an exercise in culture and warfare

simulation.

Somewhere along the line, creators of FRP's have practically lost track of the notion that sometimes a game is merely a diversion; in fact, calling a game a diversion is now tantamount to calling it worthless. Instead, designs have grown so complex that an FRP is often not a game,

but a way of life. The Might and Magic series itself succumbed to this mindset with install-ments II and III, games so dominated by puzzles and combat that completing almost any quest demanded a loss of many, many hours and even more gray matter. Such games have the potential to become nothing less than obsessions, and almost inevitably they are fascinating — but not necessarily *fun* to play.
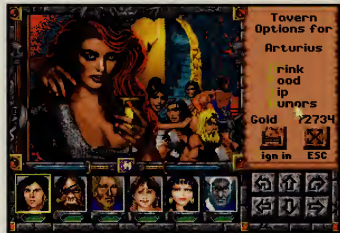
Xeen gives you top-notch graphics presented from a first-person viewpoint. It allows you to create six characters from scratch or, more conveniently, use the six pre-rolled characters to start with (they'll do just fine). If you have a 256-color display, *Xeen* will make use of it, and if

you have a sound card (practically any kind) it will make use of that as well. With the right sound equipment, in fact, you get digitized speech to go with everything else, and while the speech isn't crucial to game play, it does help (and, appropriately enough, it also makes the game more fun).

Around the main graphic display of your location are a number of fantasy figures that serve as helpers for your party. If a party member has the Danger Sense skill, the bat at the top of the screen will move its mouth when you're in a

monster's sight. The gargoyle at the left of the screen flaps its wings when you're operating under the Levitation spell, while the one on the right will wave if you are facing a thin wall with

a secret door (you can then kick it open). At the top left and top right are two gargoyle heads which, together, tell you how to answer yes/no questions and if there's either treasure or a trap (or both).

These are simple touches, true, but they're extremely well-designed, and they go far toward helping you play the game more easily. Instead of having to stop and search for secret doors, for instance, you need to simply have the skill or spell active and then walk toward walls that don't seem to belong.

Another helpful touch is automapping, quickly becoming a necessity for FRP playability. Gone (thank heavens!) are the days of producing reams and reams of

graph paper covered with incomprehensible and often incorrect mapping symbols. *Xeen*'s automapping feature requires only that one character possess the Cartography skill (one of the members in the provided party has this ability). Press the M key to display the map, which changes as you discover new territory. In addition, you can click on the Might and Magic logo at the top right to access a smaller and more localized version of the same map. With the miniature

automap active, you now have a 3-D, first-person display and a useful overhead display available at the same time. The result? Greater ease of play.

It will take some time for you to get acquainted with the icons on the right of the screen. At the bottom are directional arrow keys which you click on to move the party (you can also use the numeric keypad). Above these are the options icons. Clicking on the bow-and-arrow icon causes party members with missile weapons to shoot at whatever is in front of them, while the diamond lets you cast a spell. The tent puts the party to sleep (unfortunately, there's no provision for putting someone on watch, and you *can* be ambushed while sleeping). One icon lets you bash down doors or thin walls, another sends a party member back to Vertigo, the party's home town, and still another produces the automap.

Three important icons help you keep track of your progress. The Quick Reference icon shows the party's gold, gems, and food, something

you'll find yourself checking regularly. The Information icon shows time, date, day of the week, and year, and also which spells are currently active. The most important, however, is the View Quests icon. This yields a screen that displays which quests you've agreed to fulfill, which quest items you've gathered, and any important messages you've encountered.

In other words, it's no longer necessary to write all this stuff down: if a non-player character tells you something

significant, the game records it for you. If you can't remember whether or not you found the crucial artifact you were sent to find, this screen will let you know. If you can't remember who you were trying to rescue for whom, and where that "whom" lives, that too is

recorded for you. This is pretty much the apogee of user-friendliness as far as FRPs are concerned, and once again the effect is greatly increased ease of play.

Consistent with earlier Might and Magic games, combat in *Xeen* is based on a turn-by-turn system. The fastest character or monster acts first, then the next fastest, and so on. (An especially speedy creature might manage two attacks for every one attack from another.) You can directly control combat

actions for each character, or you can set each one to perform a standard "Quick Fight" action. Set your warriors to attack, for example, while your magic-users cast the spells they have readied: When combat occurs, simply click on the Quick Fight button. You can change these options with each turn, but often you won't want to. Quick Fight reduces one of FRP's most common problems, the tedium of battle against hordes of weaker opponents.

Spells are easy to study and cast, and in some cases you'll have to use them with extreme care to get out of tight squeezes. Make absolutely sure that more than one character can cast the Awaken spell, because you'll need it to wake up the party in several encounters with powerful magic-users. Be sure also to cast protection spells and other enhancement spells before difficult combat. Save your position often, and get ready for frequent reloading after you've been clobbered.

Even the spell system of this game is refreshing. There's nothing particularly special about how spells are cast, but the way in which you learn them is refreshingly unique. The spells aren't listed in the

manual, or anywhere else. Instead, you find out about them as your characters rise in level, and as you move from town to town and join and visit the guilds. Find a new town and enter a new guild, and you

may find that your so-so sorcerer can learn spells that will make him or her little less than awesome.

So is *Xeen* perfect? Well, no. Its greatest strength, sheer playability, is also its most important weakness. There are very few encounters with friendly non-player characters, and you'll soon learn that any creature that appears in front of you is going to try to bump you off. In other words, the fact that

you don't have to make decisions about how to treat NPCs eases play but diminishes intellectual challenge. *Xeen* is a game of discovery, fighting, and puzzle-solving, a big, sprawl-ing, and extremely enjoyable game. But if you're looking for the heights in role-playing

"realism," you're looking in the wrong place. *Xeen* is most definitely fun, and that's all it tries to be.
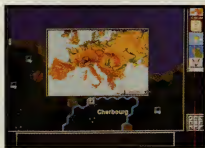

GP

THE DESKTOP GENERAL

V FOR VICTORY: *WORTH THE WAIT*

WILLIAM R. TROTTER

Using the interface of *V for Victory: Utah Beach* is like climbing behind the wheel of a fine automobile. There's the same sensation of being surrounded by fine engineering, the same confidence about what's under the hood. Steering is tight and responsive, braking is crisp and sure, and the engine fairly purrs with disciplined power.

Now that the MS/DOS version of this game is finally available, we PC war-gamers can confirm what our Macintosh-equipped friends have been saying for about a year: *V for Victory* is the BMW of war game engines.

Utah Beach is only the first of several planned campaign-sized games designed around the *V for Victory* system (a Russian Front module should be available by the time you read this). In keeping with the design principles of its highly successful Harpoon series, **Three-Sixty** will retain and refine the basic system, while marketing a library of additional battlesets that can be added later, but that still require the presence of the original game in order for them to operate.

There is a solid philosophy behind *V for Victory*: Three-Sixty calls it "the realism of command." The player's point of view is from the middle, or operational level of command — he directs the actions of the various battalions and regiments under his control, but he can neither control tactical actions nor muck around with strategic objectives. The former business is abstracted and handled by the computer, the latter are immutably fixed to coincide with historical reality.

The Utah Beach battleset comes with different battle scenarios — representing critical turning points in the battle for Normandy — and a giant-sized campaign game that begins at 6 A.M. on June 7, 1944. There are numerous well-thought-out variants which you can adopt to tweak the games experimentally, or to give the German defenders a slightly more level playing field on which to contest the massive Allied invasion.

Are you the type of general who likes to micromanage every artillery barrage and resupply operation? *V for Victory* gives you the option to play on that level. During the initial setup for each game, you can select

which routine functions will be performed by your invisible but loyal "staff assistants," leaving you free to attend to the larger rhythms of strategy, or you can do everything yourself. The configuration I found most satisfying was one which allowed me to designate air, naval, and artillery targets, but left the chores of resupply and reinforcement in the hands of my chief of staff, Colonel Bigblue.

In my opinion, Three-Sixty has done a splendid job of carrying out their "realism of command" philosophy, as stated in the game manual: "we wanted the players to be faced with the same situations, problems, concerns, unknowns and limitations that their historical counterparts had to face. We also wanted the same solutions, options, incentives, and tradeoffs that existed in reality

to exist in the game."

A clear, admirable statement of mission — the ideal that this kind of historically based game should aspire to. There are, of course, quite a few good war games that achieve this to a greater or lesser degree. I cannot think of any, however, that approaches *V for Victory* in terms of user-friendliness. The layercake design concept seduces you by means of a clean, simple, tutorial scenario ("Mopping Up") that tells you everything you need to get started, and does it in about 30 minutes. Once you're hooked, you'll set aside the basic primer (a 30-page Operations Manual) and start digging into the deeper, meatier sections of the 156-page Reference Manual. The game system *itself* — never mind the inherent drama of its historical setting — is so fascinating that you will gradually be led into richer, more sophisticated levels of play.
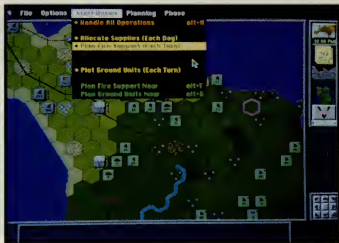
If *Game Players* had an award for Best Interface of the year, *V for Victory* would certainly be a top candidate. Despite the depth and complexity found in the more challenging levels of play, everything about the interface is lucid, logical, and breathtakingly elegant, a model of how this kind of thing should be done.

All scenarios are played on a hex-based map of the Normandy theater (the hexes can be toggled off, but they're still used in calculating movement and combat) stretching from the left flank of Utah Beach (approximately the village of Carenten), across the base of the Cotentin Peninsula and terminating at the heavily fortified port of Cherbourg. Each hex represents approximately one square kilometer, and each game turn equals four hours of real time.

On the American side, the campaign objective is to break out from the beachhead into the beckoning plains of France, while forcing the surrender of Cherbourg at the earliest opportunity; on the German side, the objective is to stop the Americans from doing just that. You even have the option of switching sides at any point in the game, a feature which will surely delight all those players who like to try out wild tactical ideas.

Battles in this simulation need not always come out as favorable to the Allied side as their historical counterparts. By adjusting the starting options to incorporate all the units the Germans *could* have had on June 7, 1944, and factoring in the terrific defensive possibilities of the *bocage* country, you can set up a real contest.

I kept trying to assemble a powerful armored thrust, to knife through some weak point in the German lines and go for broke towards Paris, instead of lapsing into a gradual and costly "wide-front" strategy such as Eisenhower and Montgomery cooked up. That modified blitzkrieg strategy is a good one, but not easy to accomplish! Whichever side you fight on, the computer has been programmed to be a daunting opponent — stubborn on defense and fearsomely aggressive on the attack. Allied armor comes ashore in frustrating little packets each day, while the Germans — despite their lack of air cover — produce a steady stream of reserve units.

At their best — which is most of the time — the battles in *Utah Beach* are as white-knuckled and intense as in any PC war game yet designed. Time after time, the computer surprised me and forced me to deal with various unexpected crises much as a real commander would have to do.

Victory points are awarded for the taking of geographical objectives, for inflicting high losses on the enemy, and are sometimes *taken away* from the Allied side if you or your human opponent over-uses the offshore power of naval units. Destroying an enemy unit is all well and good, but if you can force it to surrender, you'll receive *triple* victory points. The German player wins if his defense is stubborn enough to shatter the Allies' hopes for liberating Paris in 1944. In this and several other subtle ways, Three-Sixty has eliminated any sense of inevitable defeat for those who elect to play the German side.

Graphically, *V for Victory* leaves nothing to be desired — everything is crisp, bright, and fine-grained. From interface to artwork, there is a sleek, proud, thoroughbred quality to this game. When I first saw some demo screens of the Mac version at one of the 1991 Consumer Electronics Shows, a Three-Sixty representative said: "We can promise you that this game is going to be something special." That promise has been well and truly kept. *V for Victory* is a splendid achievement.

GP

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MS-DOS Screens Pictured.

THE LEARNING GAME

MAKING A LIST, CHECKING IT TWICE

LESLIE EISER

Treasure Math Storm

Zug's Race Through Space

Considering the state of the economy, you might think software retailers would have been a bit hesitant when placing orders for the 1992 Christmas buying season. But the PC software market has remained amazingly stable during the recession, even experiencing growth, and educational software is no exception. In fact, there are more learning games available now than ever before. At my last count, there were at least 20 new "educational" programs slated for release in time Christmas.

To help you pick and choose from among the wealth of new products, I've decided to quickly describe the most promising of these new programs. In future issues there should be time for more in-depth reviews.

Easily the most exciting program for the pre-school set is **Broderbund's** *Just Grandma and Me*, for PCs equipped with CD-ROM drives. Adorable animation and exceptional digitized speech (tri-lingual, yet — English, Spanish, and Japanese!) make this the perfect game for the lap-sitting bunch. It's a must for every household which has the requisite hardware to run it.

For kids ages 6 to 12, there's a veritable deluge of new programs, from word processors that double as art programs to science adventures, geography games, and math tutorials. In each and every case, publishers have ambitiously combined detailed VGA graphics, dynamite sound effects, cute animated sequences, and solid educational content. To choose just one would be like eating one potato chip — it's possible, but I for one can't do it! All are excellent choices, so you can't go too far wrong with any of them.

A strong newcomer in the math drill-and-practice division is *Treasure Math Storm* from **The Learning Company**, an arcade-style game aimed at the 5- to 9-year-old level. There's a lot of variety to keep your child from becoming bored — evading flying snowballs, capturing frolicsome elves, doing the occasional math problem, and correctly piling up snowballs to gain points.

To young users, the highlights of this game are the three problem-solving areas: They'll use the balance beam to solve equality problems in the Gold Area, answer questions that help teach how to read a clock and tell time in the Time Igloo, and do some simple problems in Base 10 in the Crystal Cave. The goal is to garner enough points to end the ice storm on Treasure Mountain, putting a stop to another of Marty Maxwell's misadventures. More adventure than math drill, this is an amusing program, ideally suited to its target age group.

A couple of the most impressive products among the new science programs come from respected publisher **Davidson**. *Zug's Race Through Space* is the more arcade-oriented of the two, featuring glorious visuals of each planet and a healthy serving of planetary trivia. The point of the game is rather silly, and the action drags somewhat at times, but the science content is solid and the frequent jokes appropriate to the age group.

In *Zoo Keeper*, on the other hand, there are fewer drill routines and more on-the-spot training exercises. Your job is

Story Weaver

to keep the cages clean and the different animals well-nourished; to be effective, you'll have to learn to recognize different animals by their pictures, to select the most appropriate meal for each group, and to throw out the junk that gets tossed into the cages. Packed with environmentally oriented information about animals from around the world, this remarkable game effectively combines digitized backdrops with animated animals, sound education, and realistic sound effects, including animal sounds that have to be heard to be believed! (For a more detailed look at *Zoo Keeper*, check out my column in the November/December 1992 issue.)

There are precious few word processors aimed specifically at youngsters, but the field is expanding greatly with *Kid Works 2* from Davidson and *Story Weaver* from MECC. *Kid Works 2* is a fascinating blend of art program, word processor, and text-to-speech utility. The attractive main menu encourages kids to combine text and graphics into their own stories, and customized artwork created with the drawing program can be used to further illustrate their compositions. A Story Reader option invites children to listen to their tales while the words and pictures are displayed.

For slightly older writers, there's *Story Weaver* from MECC. Again

Quarky & Quaysoo's Turbo Science

the idea is to combine words and pictures, only in this case kids use a collection of extraordinarily detailed clip-art, divided into categories such as people, things, vehicles, and buildings. Each piece of art can be flipped, colored, expanded, or shrunk — the final results

are limited only by the imagination of the user. The quality of the color images is unbelievable, making a color printer almost a necessity.

All these programs have plenty to offer, but the most stunning array of new titls is intended for users 11 and older. One of the most outstanding releases is **Spirit of Discovery**'s *Body Illustrated*, a visual tour-de-force of human anatomy. With 13 lessons on topics from the skeletal system to special senses and a competitive quiz mode to test your retention, it's a better teacher than most textbooks on the subject.

For science education with an enchanting amusement-park theme, there's *Quarky & Quaysoo's Turbo Science* from

Riders in American History, a cinemagraphic experience centered on the essential facts of Who, What, When, and Where. (*Time Riders* was also covered in my last column.) This a game worth finishing not for only for the acquired knowledge of American History, but also for the satisfaction of knowing how the story ends. And for the geography buffs in your house, there's *Where in the USA is Carmen Sandiego: Deluxe Edition*. **Broderbund**'s enhanced CD-ROM version of the disk-based game includes a new Chief, 15 new villains, and more than 3000 clues. If you like Carmen (and who doesn't?), you'll definitely want to add this upgrade to your collection.

Last but certainly not least

Where in the USA is Carmen Sandiego: Deluxe Edition

Dynamix. A drill-and-practice game disguised with a racing motif, the addition of a research mode, a comic-book style research guide, and an interactive tool kit make this an extraordinary product. It takes the widest possible view of physical science, covering areas as conceptually diverse as simple machines and the periodic table in a manner sure to intrigue kids 12 to 15. Each of the 20 different race checkpoints features questions on a different topic, and the order of the checkpoints is varied randomly. This keeps users on their toes — and the research guide open on their laps.

American history fans are going to particularly enjoy **The Learning Company**'s *Time*

is *The Island of Dr. Brain* from Sierra. Puzzle fiends will love being frustrated by this mathematical (not arithmetical) challenge. Not all the games are completely original, but the visual affects — from the rising of the sun over Dr. Brain's island to the volcano erupting on the summit — are spectacular. It may not be accurate to call a series of mind-bending puzzles educational, but even a quick look will convince the most discriminating user that the hours spent helping Dr. Brain is time well-spent.
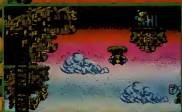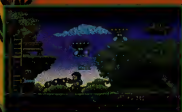
GP

MANTIS: XF5700
EXPERIMENTAL SPACE FIGHTER

LEE BUCHANAN

Since its introduction a couple of years ago, the Wing Commander series has ruled the genre of outer-space combat in computer gaming. But

with the release of *Mantis:XF5700 Experimental Space Fighter*, it's clear that MicroPlay is taking aim at the champ. There's even a sticker on the box which reads, "If you liked that *other* space game, you'll love *Mantis!*"

Mantis, developed by **Paragon** and distributed by **Microprose**, is a huge game: it requires about 20 megs on the hard drive, and it's chock-full of spectacular graphics and cinematic scenes. As you watch the digitized graphics of the game's introduction — a chilling account of an alien invasion and humanity's subsequent desperate fight for survival — the anticipation builds that *Mantis* might be a contender for *Wing Commander*'s crown.

After the promising opening, however, *Mantis* just gets lost in space. Once you've settled into the cockpit of the XF5700 experimental fighter, the excitement of the introductory and cinematic sequences fizzles because the actual combat sequences, though fast-paced, are just too simplistic and can grow tiresome in a hurry.

The scenario is familiar: In the year 2094, the insect-like Siriens launched a surprise attack on Earth, killing three billion people and gaining a strong

foothold on the planet. Now, months later, Earth forces have nearly managed to wipe out the Siriens on the planet proper, but another alien assault is expected.

Fist of Earth (F.O.E.) has been given the task of defeating the invaders. Equipped with a space station and a secret lunar installation, F.O.E. has 80 Mantis fighters to take on a variety of Sirien spacecraft. You and your comrades, members of an elite fighter squadron, must save the planet.

You're assigned to the corp of Mantis pilots on the space station, where you undergo training in a simulator before

taking on a series of real missions that increase in complexity and difficulty.

The Mantis is a one-person space fighter that can be armed with two cannons, three types of missiles and two types of
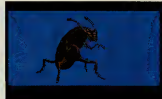
mines. In addition, the pilot can send probes to relay information about Sirien activity and gather data about the enemy's spacecraft and weaponry.

Instrumentation is centered on the heads-up display, which can show a weapons display, radar, damage indicator, communications system, a solar chart, and a navigation chart. Other familiar features are included, such as a Quad Jump function for instantly travelling long distances, six exterior and interior views, and a replay feature.

Mantis includes nine autopilot modes that let the computer handle the chores of travelling to waypoints, maneuvering the ship, and tracking the enemy. While this push-button flying doesn't generate the excitement that an action game

ought to have, it's a good thing all those autopilot modes are included — the Mantis is almost impossible to fly manually.

Why is the Mantis so hard to control? Because the designers chose to faithfully recreate the true dynamics of space flight. Realism is usually commendable in computer simulations, but in this case sticking to true space-flight characteristics seriously hampers the player's ability to control the ship. Thrust and direction just don't have the same meaning as they do on Earth. In manual flight, I found it nearly impossible to pursue an enemy vessel. I invariably

found myself hitting autopilot mode three and letting the computer do it for me.

On the surface, Mantis appears to have all the ingredients necessary for an excellent space-combat sim. But once you get past the gorgeous shots of your

"How was my favorite pilot's first day?"

fighter leaving the space station, the missions themselves are shoot-em-up affairs that leave little room or time for planning or tactics.

A typical mission goes like this: You're ordered to proceed to an asteroid where enemy fighter activity has been detected. After clearing the station, use Quad Jump to reach your destination, then switch on the autopilot to lock on to the bad guys. Fire a missile, watch the explosion, then wait for the Mantis to lock on to another enemy craft.

And that's about it for combat. You keep firing, using the cannon after exhausting the missiles, until you win or die. Defensive measures are minimal. A computer-controlled cannon targets incoming mis-

siles, but once a bad guy has locked onto you, you're probably going to get hit. And when you're shield is down during combat, it's a cinch you and you're Mantis are about to be turned into space junk — take the opportunity you're given to jettison from the craft and return to the space station.

There is a bit of variety in the missions. You might be assigned to escort transport ships, or sent to a distant system to gather data with probes. But the key role of the Mantis —and the *raison d'etre* for this game — is space combat. And here *Mantis* just can't keep pace with its tough competition.

Combat graphics, what there are of them, are good enough. Explosions, in particular, add some much-needed drama to the encounters. Other

spacecraft (when you can seem them) are well-depicted, as are planets. But there just isn't enough visual interest.

Sound effects for weapons and explosions are very well-done, but as with the graphics the best sound effects are found at home in the space station. There's a bit of digitized speech,

but none during combat where it would prove most effective. Many missions have the player flying with wingmen, but communications are limited to the standard text messages (Microplay promises expanded speech capability as an add-on product).

The designers seem to have expended a great deal of effort in the cinematic sequences that serve to tie the missions together and give substance to the game's plot. But many of the cinematic encounters seem pointless; some are just a waste of disk space.

Early in the campaign, for instance, our fearless hero runs into an old flame who has wound up tending bar on the space station. They have a pleasant conversation. We learn that her family was killed by the invaders and that she's had it pretty rough lately. They'll have dinner together sometime
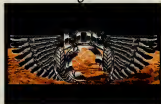
— and that's it. This lengthy sequence does nothing to advance or support the plot, or even to make the game more interesting.

Between missions other characters are introduced in a similar fashion, including the commander, the training officer, and other pilots. It's all nice enough (except for a bit of pointless profanity), but when it's all said and done these peripheral encounters don't add enough atmosphere to make *Mantis* a better game.

Mantis is big, brash, and beautiful. But when you peel away the glitzy wrapper, all you'll is find an average computer game.

GP

Hardware requirements: 640K RAM; VGA/MCGA graphics; hard drive; supports AdLib, Covox, Roland, and Sound Blaster sound boards, mouse or joystick recommended.

QUEST FOR GLORY III: WAGES OF WAR

LESLIE MIZELL

Whew! This third installment in Sierra's Quest for Glory series is a *whole* lotta game! The Quest for Glory adventures have proven to be consistently excellent, and *Wages of War* confirms that designers Lori Ann and Corey Cole can be relied on to bring something unique to standard quests which sets their games apart from the competition.

Wages of War, for example, is probably the first adventure game to feature an African setting — albeit a mythical Africa populated by giant ants and CrocMen. You'll learn something about African cultures, from their reliance on the seasons to their language to their strategy game Awari (you might know it as Mankala). It's also obvious that care was taken to make the different African characters representative of diverse tribes.

In *Wages of War*, your hero is fresh from his adventures in medieval Spielberg (*Quest for Glory: So You Want to be a Hero*) and Arabian Shapeir (*Quest for Glory II: Trial by Fire*) when he's sent to Tarna, along with Rakeesh (a member of Liontaur royalty) and Uhura (a female warrior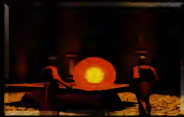 from the Simbani tribe). It takes some time to sort out, but you eventually discover that your hero has two major quests: He must bring peace to the warring Simbani and Leopardman tribes by returning objects sacred to each, then journey to a Lost City deep in the
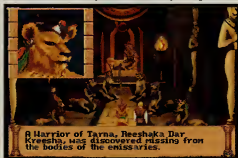
jungle where a wizard is spiriting up evil demons.

Naturally, there are subquests, which include gathering the Gem of the Guardian for the Sekhmet temple, gathering ingredients for a dispel potion, rescuing Rakeesh's daughter, and — surprise! — buying a bride.

As in the first two Quest for Glory games, you can choose among several professions in *Wages of War*: fighter (or paladin, if you achieved that status in *Trial by Fire*), magician, or thief. Although the game follows basically the same path regardless of which character you choose, a few puzzles are unique to specific professions, and some problems have several solutions. For example, the Magic Drum of the Leopardman village is held by the Simbani chief, Laibon. If you're a thief, you simply steal the drum. A fighter or paladin must win it through an initiation

contest, and a magician receives the drum from the Laibon after beating the Leopardman shaman in a test of sorcery.

Those who have played either or both of the previous games in the series will be interested to know they can import characters from those games into *Wages of War*. There are advantages and disadvantages to this, and whether you should start with a seasoned hero largely depends on how you fared in the earlier games. In addition, Sierra reports that some people
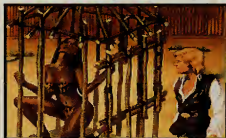
run into bugs fairly late in the game with imported characters of all professions; there is a patch program available that alleviates the trouble.

When we imported a thief-hero into *Wages of War*, he ended up with greater statistics in all categories but dodge, stealth, lockpicking, throwing, and climbing. Since you pick only one lock and climb nary a
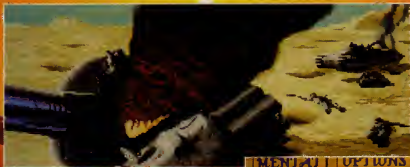
A Warrior of Tarna, Reeshaka Dar Kreesha, was discovered missing from the bodies of the emissaries.
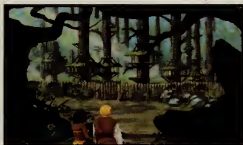
tree, the poor ratings for those abilities posed no problem. Weak throwing ability, on the other hand, can get you into hot water.

Thieves don't really fight creatures in *Wages of War;* your best bet is to retreat, then stone your enemies into bloody corpses (truly icky, but it's kill or be killed). This means your throwing ability should be at its maximum, 300 points. Thieves and fighters can (and should) spend an entire day in the savanna just throwing stones to increase their throwing prowess. It's a better practice range than the spear-throwing area in the Simbani village — you don't need to retrieve the stones, and throwing them doesn't drain your stamina.

The cardinal rule of adventure gaming — saving games early and often — should be followed here. It's unusually easy to get far beyond a given point and find that you've left some item behind, and scattered saved-games help avoid lengthy backtracking. Having several saved games is also handy because some events must unfold in a certain order. For instance, after you've purchased Johari as your bride, you should give her a few gifts. When you visit her, Uhura is guarding the cage. You must ask Uhura about the gifts, then leave the screen — even if you already have presents in your inventory. Return immediately, and a new guard is on duty. Now give Johari the gifts and set her free. Progress in a different way, and you're likely stuck with no gifts, no bride, and no guide to the Leopardman village.

To its credit, however, *Wages of War* features an auto-

matic-save feature for events that come totally out of the blue — not sudden attacks by creatures, but times when you may want to try several approaches to a situation. Be aware that if you want to keep that automatic save, you'd better name it something else. Each subsequent auto-save erases the one before.

You'll also need to worry about finding food. Unlike the

friendly citizens of Shapeir, who loaded you up with provisions in *Trial by Fire,* no one in Tarna or the Simbani village seems anxious to feed a financially insecure hero. You can buy rations in Tarna's bazaar, but money is always a problem. If you're running short of cash, buy meat from the dog. He's

pretty stupid — you can bargain with him until he's practically giving it away. Buy a lot; food disappears from your inventory even when you're not consciously feeding your hero.

Though not quite as cohesive or logical as either of the previous *Quest for Glory* games, *Wages of War* is longer and more challenging. Its innovative setting is a definite plus, as is the terrific soundtrack. And for those of you *Trial by Fire* players who thought evil Ad Avis would be ready for revenge in *QGIII,* you get a brief preview of events in *QGIV: Shadows of Darkness* at the end of this adventure.

GP

Hardware requirements: 640K RAM; VGA or EGA graphics (Tandy VGA only); 286 or better; hard drive; supports most sound cards; mouse recommended.

CARRIERS AT WAR

JEFF SEIKEN

Carriers At War (CAW) needs no introduction to most war gamers. Initially released some eight years ago, CAW is regarded by many as the definitive war game for 8-bit systems, unsurpassed in its depth of historical detail and exciting game play. Despite its primitive graphics, the game captured the feel of carrier warfare with uncanny accuracy: the long interludes of tension and uncertainty as each side groped for the other, punctuated by sudden, almost cathartic, moments of explosive fury when the air strikes went in. Playing CAW was as much a visceral experience as it was an intellectual one.

Now CAW has been thoroughly revamped by its publisher, Strategic Studies Group (SSG), much to the gratification of war-gaming fans who have been clamoring for a 16-bit version for years. Interestingly enough, however, if you strip away all of the bells and whistles, you'll find that the game's engine remains essentially unchanged—a testament to the soundness of the original's design. As in the 8-bit version, the new CAW features game turns of no set length. Instead, the clock ticks along continuously in five-minute intervals until either the player or some event interrupts things. When the game is stopped, you are free to check the status of friendly forces, study the latest sighting reports, and enter orders to the units under your command.

CAW comes with six scenarios covering the major carrier actions of the war: Pearl Harbor (more of a learning tool than a competitive contest), Coral Sea, Midway, Eastern Solomons, Santa Cruz, and the Marianas. Your exact responsibilities depend on which command roles you decide to assume at the start of a scenario. Each scenario offers you a choice of from one to six task-force and land-based command slots. The naval and air assets of any position you decline to handle will be controlled by the computer.

As you might expect, donning the hat of one (or more) of the task-force commanders is by far the most interesting and challenging option. In this role, you control the movements of all the individual groups within the particular task force. You also direct the actions of all squadrons belonging to any aircraft carriers in the task force.

In keeping with the idea of specific command positions, the game incorporates a strong sense of perspective throughout play; in other words, the player can perform only those duties that the actual task-force or air-base commander would handle, with the computer taking care of the rest. On air strikes, for instance, you target the enemy task group to be attacked, but the computer flies the planes to their destination and then determines each plane's target. The constraints on player control may frustrate some, but this emphasis on viewpoint is central to the game's design.

Everything in the preceding paragraphs will be quite familiar to CAW vets. So what's new about the game? Plenty. The most noticeable and welcome improvement is that the game now sports some of the most superb visuals seen in a war game. The designers have come up with a graphical interface that is not only easy to use but also enhances play immensely through its attractive displays. On the carrier info screen, for example, the squadron status boxes appear against the backdrop of an American or Japanese carrier slicing through the sea. It's true that much of the artwork is little more than background scenery, but it still works to deepen your enjoyment of the game in much the same way photos and drawings increase your appreciation of a history book.
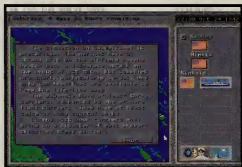
Some of the other changes include a tactical system for resolving surface engagements (which practically amounts to a game within a game) and a vastly improved artificial intelligence (AI) scheme. Instead of acting according to a single set of fixed instructions, the new AI gives the computer the capability to implement a range of plans tailored to the specific scenario being played. Finally, SSG deserves special praise for the meticulous research that has gone into the game. To cite one telling example of the depths to which the designers have plumbed the historical record, consider this: Instead of rating

STEVE MERETZKY'S

SPELLCASTING 301

VGA
256-COLOR

SPRING BREAK™

Welcome to the Royal Intesta
Hotel.

VESA compatible Super VGA
support.

...where you can relax after a
day on the beach...

Richly detailed environment
allows unlimited exploration.

...or enjoy the finest in evening
entertainment.

*F*ollow the sun and the scent of coconut oil straight to Fort Naughtytail where Ernie Eaglebeak parties hardy with his fraternity pals in this high energy seaside romp. Ernie is hoping to find sand in all the wrong places, but ends up battling a rival fraternity from back home in a series of zany beach contests complete with gorgeous babes, wet T-shirts, mud wrestling and body surfing.

*E*rnie must use his wits and a healthy dose of magic to save the honor of his fraternity. There's a lot to do, and the Ft. Naughtytail Police Dept. is desperately trying to keep everyone from doing it!

256-color VGA! Stunning original art plus digitized "Girls of Spring Break."

pilots for their experience level on a squadron-by-squadron basis, *CAW* rates each flyer individually. That's *very* impressive.

The game itself delivers all of the drama and suspense that you could hope for from a simulation of carrier battles. During the pre-battle maneuvering, the tension is almost palpable as you eye the empty reaches of the ocean where the enemy may be lurking. The sketchy and unreliable nature of the intelligence that dribbles in as the scenario progresses only adds to your anxieties. In the end, *CAW* tests not only your skills as a strategist, but your nerves and resolve as well. Few war games provide you with more insight into the psychology of battle.

CAW is unquestionably a first-class product, but the game is not without its flaws. As a simulation, it disappoints on several accounts. One of the most noticeable shortcomings is the absence of certain key tactical options that should be available to the player. The most glaring example is your inability to detach a crippled ship from a task group and send it back to base. Your only choice,

short of slowing down the task group to accommodate the damaged ship, is to scuttle it.

The mechanics for handling air-to-sea searches have also been watered down. Historically, it took one or two planes to search a ten-degree vector of ocean, forcing the task-force commander to weigh very carefully just how many of his precious carrier planes he was willing to devote to search missions. Dispatching too many

planes could leave the carrier too weak to launch an effective strike; sending out too few could allow the enemy to approach within strike range undetected.

CAW renders this whole critical issue moot, however, by allowing a pair of planes to search a 45-degree vector of ocean. Since the enemy's location is typically limited to three or four of these vectors, it's usually quite easy to cover all eventualities with a minimal number of aircraft. Thus, the game takes what should have been one of the more interesting points of strategy and turns it into a cut-and-dried decision.

There are a couple of characteristics in game play that might best be described as annoyances. One of the more irritating aspects of *CAW* is that the weather display on the map disappears whenever the clock is running. If you're trying to hide in a squall, you have to halt the game every five to fifteen minutes to make sure you're still under cover.

Then there are the combat displays. *CAW*'s full-color, semi-animated combat screens provide you with the equivalent of a front-row seat at every air strike. You see puffs of flak dot the sky and bombs plunge into the sea or rip into ships in explosive fireballs. The sudden shift in perspective is a bit jarring in a game that goes to some lengths to cultivate an authentic sense of player perspective, but the bomb-by-bomb action makes for some stirring theater. More to the point, however, the combat scenes also tend to drag on interminably, especially during the larger air strikes. And if you'd rather bypass these scenes, you're out of luck: There's no way to disable the display.

Given the overlap in subject matter, comparisons between *CAW* and SSI's *Carrier*
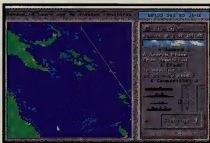
Strike (itself a remake of the older 8-bit game from SSI called *Carrier Force*) are unavoidable. *Carrier Strike* is a more satisfying simulation in some respects (searches are handled in more realistic style and crippled ships can split off from task forces) and less in others (task forces move at a single, fixed rate and the cruising speed of airplanes has been fudged).

Perhaps *Carrier Strike*'s biggest advantage over *CAW* is that it includes a campaign option, enabling you to fight a whole series of carrier actions in the South Pacific from 1942 to 1944. Though *CAW* lacks a comparable option, there is a construction kit for *CAW* (available separately) which allows you to create scenarios from scratch, modify existing ones, and reprogram the artificial intelligence. *CAW* is also the clear winner when it comes to appearances, with graphics that make *Carrier Strike* look almost amateurish by comparison.

The bottom line? On the strength of its beautiful graphics, detailed research, and realistic gameplay, *CAW* has reestablished itself as one of the premier war games on the market. Nonetheless, for all of its many fine features, it falls short of being the final word on its subject. That honor awaits some future title. But until such a game materializes, *Carriers At War* should keep most war game afficionados more than happily occupied.

GP

Hardware Requirements: 640K RAM; VGA or EGA graphics; mouse; supports AdLib and Sound Blaster sound cards.

SPELLCASTING 301:
SPRING BREAK

GARY MEREDITH

"Hold it right there, you little twit!," blasts the voice of Staff Sergeant "Mad" Morrison. "You loved hair grease that matches your type on some of the smushed furniture at Club."

Some men are born to greatness, others have it thrust upon them — and then there's Ernie Eaglebeak, who trips over greatness as if it were the extremely gaudy shag rug in his humble dormitory room at Sorcerer University. You'd think that after nearly three years at that illustrious institution, Ernie would have developed at least a semblance of maturity, but *nooooo* — he still manages to expand the boundaries of geekdom. Even making him Carpetmaster of the Hu Delta Phart fraternity hasn't affected our Ernie.

On the eve of Spring Break, naturally the most important event of the school year, Carpetmaster Eaglebeak sabotages the proceedings right off the bat by renting a high-mileage flying carpet with less than the basic safety features. When the HDP gang hurtles into the festivities at Ft. Naughtytail — minus all their possessions, tossed over in a frantic attempt

to avoid a crash landing — it's evident that Ernie's "charmed" life is once again in control of everyone's destiny.

After Ernie and the boys from Hu Delta Phart (known affectionately on campus as simply "the Pharts") sort themselves out, they hit the beach, where they run almost immediately into a brick wall in the form of a rival fraternity, the Yus from St. Weinersburg Academy of Magic. The tanned,

buffed, and oiled Yus are a major threat to the Pharts getting any girlie action, but just when it looks as though the Pharts

might have to spend Spring Break in their hotel rooms, a mysterious and gorgeous woman known only as the Judge appears on the scene. Inexplicably, she volunteers to oversee a "friendly" competition between the Yus and the Pharts which will determine which frat presides over Ft. Naughtytail.

The events are your usual no-brainer beach fare — volleyball, bodysurfing, tanning, belly-flopping, sandcastle building, weightlifting, bullfighting (*bullfighting?*), and drinking to excess, the premiere event of any beach holiday. But for the inept Pharts to succeed at any of these events, they'll need some serious sorcery from Ernie. Which means that, in addition to performing in the competitions, Ernie must find the items, and the experience, he needs for all the feats of magic he'll be called upon to conjure. And it wouldn't be like our Ernie to miss out on the more

amorous aspects of any situation, so you can rest assured there will be plenty of young lovelies for our hero to drool over.

As Ernie goes about gathering and conjuring, he meets up with the old guys at the Ft. Naughtytail Sorcerer's Guild, who send him out on a few errands, too. Completing these errands helps Ernie to build up his sorcery experience level, so that he can perform some of the more complex spells required later on in the adventure. Everything finally comes together in a patented Spellcasting finale that is probably less than a total surprise to players who helped Ernie out in his last two adventures.

Legend Entertainment's *Spellcasting 301: Spring Break*

definitely has an air of deja vu. Although this third installment from Steve Meretzky has been dressed up with some fairly

slick new graphics, there haven't been any other changes from the old formula. Game play still centers on finding items upon which you cast found spells in order to solve puzzles, all within a specific time frame.

Of course, you still must figure out how all the components, however illogically, go together, and therein lies the charm and the challenge of the Spellcasting series. A few of the sequences are somewhat obvious, such as putting together Azure's blues with a certain blue bomb you've purchased, or getting the Sorcerers' lighthouse bulb repaired at the one place in town that advertises bulb repair. But for each gimme like those, there's a really obtuse puzzle, such as crossing the Stream of Consciousness, or winning the volleyball match against all odds. Anyone expecting the usual fun and games of the Spellcasting series, along with the raunchy humor (the default mode is "Nice" — you must select "Naughty" mode)
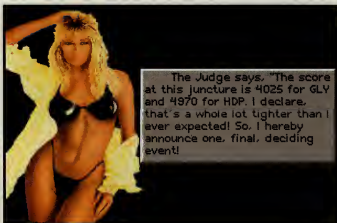
won't find any surprises here.

Nor are there any surprises in game play. It's still very simple to save and restore as many games as your hard drive has room for. And navigating to the various locations also remains a snap whether you type, use shorthand direction commands, or point and click on the compass rose. Legend's interface also provides help in solving some problems by displaying not only a list of all objects in a scene — whether in your possession or not — but also by listing verbs which might pertain to a given situation. You can often unearth a

valuable clue by examining both the verb and object lists.

There is, however, a disadvantage to this sort of interface. While it's true that you can finally get used to using only the mouse, there is still enough awkwardness in the interface to force many people to abandon their rodents for the keyboard. Actually, I found myself employing a hybrid technique, using the mouse for getting around the game map while typing most game commands.

If there is a disappointment — albeit a small one — to the game, it is with the graphics, which seem to be caught in the transition between the excellent EGA graphics of *Spellcasting 101* and the SVGA graphics to which Legend aspires. The VESA-driven SVGA graphics are fine, but the viewing screen is pretty small, and it seems that less attention has been lavished on the EGA screens. It's not that the game's graphics are bad — far from it. It's just natural to assume that a company which exercised such artistry in EGA would be at the forefront in

VGA as well. As evolutionary successors to Meretzky's well-known text adventures, such as *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Gal-*

axy, *Spellcasting 301: Spring Break* is quite advanced. It's only when compared to the latest offerings from Sierra or EA that the graphics suffer.

Despite this minor complaint, *Spellcasting 301: Spring Break* is nonetheless eminently enjoyable. Fans of the previous

two offerings will find much that is familiar, yet much that is still challenging. Players unfamiliar with the series will be glad to know that it's not necessary to have played the previous games, though the newest installment is good enough to have them backing up to sample Ernie's first two years at Sorcerer U. Viewed as a transitional work, both in Ernie's adventures and in Legend's evolving graphic mastery, *Spellcasting 301: Spring Break* only whets the appetite for Ernie's senior year at SU. After all, I'm still hoping Ernie and Lola Tigerbelly can "kiss and make up" (or is that "out?").

GP

CONQUERED KINGDOMS

LEE BUCHANAN

Gamers eager to see a little sword and sorcery in their war simulations will welcome the release of *Conquered Kingdoms*, a game of medieval conquest from **Quantum Quality Products (QQP)**, creators of the highly acclaimed *The Perfect General* and *The Lost Admiral*.

Conquered Kingdoms lets computer gamers assume the role of a medieval king bent on ruling the entire realm of Cascatia. The player allocates knights, archers, dragons, and other units to defend his strongholds and attack the enemy. Resources must be seized in order to produce additional units.

The variety of units, scenarios, and maps, along with modem and E-mail play, should assure a long life for *Conquered Kingdoms* on the hard drives of gamers longing to do battle medieval style.

The player has the option of trying to conquer any of nine individual maps, or taking on

the greater challenge of ruling the entire world in the campaign scenario. To begin the game, choose a scenario and an opponent, then select one of the 21 levels of difficulty. The variables affecting difficulty include fixed or variable damage, game length, size of forces, and alternating city selection.

After setting the pre-game options, you select two or three towns to control. As in *The Perfect General*, you're allocated a pool of points for "purchasing" variously priced units; your quota of points changes from

scenario to scenario.

As you might expect, castles are extremely valuable possessions in *Conquered Kingdoms*. Points are awarded for each castle controlled and, more importantly, new units you've created with resources report for duty in the castles. Without a castle, you won't get any new recruits to replace your knights that have been toasted by enemy dragons. Towns also carry their own point values, which are calculated for each turn of the game.

As king, you control a host of different units, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. The eight basic units found in the game include knights, swordsmen, archers, cavalry, lancers, catapults, spies, and boats. Boats serve a dual purpose: they can be used to attack ground forces, or be loaded with other units in order to launch an invasion.

Of course, no medieval world would be complete without some magic and monsters, and *Conquered Kingdoms* has no shortage of these. Players may purchase wizards, dragons, rogs, phantoms, ogres, gargoyles, trolls, and lots of other strange and powerful units. These advanced units
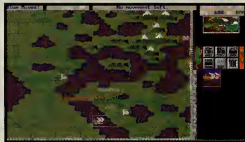
have their own unique capabilities: Wizards can hurl fireballs and teleport great distances; dragons breathe fire; and rogs can travel over water. Each unit is rated for defensive and offensive capabilities against each possible opponent, and those relationships are well-documented and easily accessed during play.

The composition of armies, then, is a prime consideration that requires a delicate balance of the various units. Send a horde of swordsmen against a dragon and they'll be reduced to smoking suits of armor in a hurry. A few archers, on the other hand, can team up to cut the dragon down to size. The key to success in *Conquered Kingdoms* is knowing what combination of units to send against the enemy — which forces to use in an attack, and which to use to occupy the conquered towns and castles.

The acquisition of resources is another crucial factor. Units tend to get wiped out pretty quickly, and without re-

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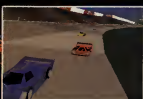
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sources they can't be replaced. Carefully consider the location of resources, seize them, and begin strengthening your army.

As the manual suggests, *Conquered Kingdoms* is not a game for the defensive-minded player. Sit in your castle and wait for the enemy and you'll have dragons, catapults, and wizards at your doorstep in no time. A castle comes under siege when the enemy occupies three siege points around the fortress. And during a siege, a castle loses strength and cannot be reinforced.

Areas on the map that produce natural resources — coal, gold, and lumber — must be occupied for at least two turns in order to produce new military

units. Once a unit occupies a resource site for three turns, it belongs to that side for the rest of the battle. Use the resources screen to choose what kind of units to build with the available resources.

After you become accustomed to *Conquered Kingdoms*, you'll probably want to move on to the Cascatia campaign game, which ties together a series of maps and scenarios into an entire world of medieval conquest in which you battle the opposing king for control of a majority of the counties that make up the realm. Like the individual scenarios, the Cascatia campaign includes several maps, including a random realm. Depending on whether you're attacking or defending — and depending on how well you fare in an individual battle — you can lose or gain four or five counties after each battle.

Also unique to the campaign scenario is the officer unit. Officers have the ability to heal wounded units, and that can mean the difference in a tight battle. As officers receive promotions, their healing abilities increase, making them even more valuable.

In both the individual battles and campaign mode, combat is resolved in several stages. Melee combat, which occurs when opposing units occupy the same space, is resolved first, followed by ranged combat between archers, catapults, boats and dragons.

Graphics, though not extraordinary, are clean and functional. Units are represented in board-game fashion on the map with fixed figures. When melee combat occurs, an action window shows an animated depiction of the fight and the result. Ranged combat is a bit more fun to watch on the map, with archers sending clouds of arrows toward their target and wizards, catapults and dragons hurling fireballs.

The point-and-click interface (a mouse is required) couldn't be more simple. Movement is accomplished by pointing to a destination and clicking the left mouse button. An entire campaign can be played without taking your hand away from the mouse.

Conquered Kingdoms supports Sound Blaster and AdLib sound boards, but sound effects do little to enhance the game. It's not that the music and sound effects are poorly done; there's simply not that much to hear.

As with the *Perfect General*, many players will find the modem option to be the shining point of *Conquered Kingdoms*.

The artificial intelligence of the computer opponent is solid, but there's nothing as exciting as matching wits with a friend (or foe?) across town. There's also an E-mail option that allows you to record a series of moves and send it to a co-worker across the office (or across the country via an online service).

Conquered Kingdoms does a nice job of keeping track of a player's performance. Click on the "view royalty" option and you'll see your successes and failures documented. This feature also tracks average and high scores for the various maps. During the game, a battle info screen displays graphs showing victory points, casualties, and resource rates. Afterward, the victory screen shows who was victorious, and the award screen shows the scores of the players and their rank:
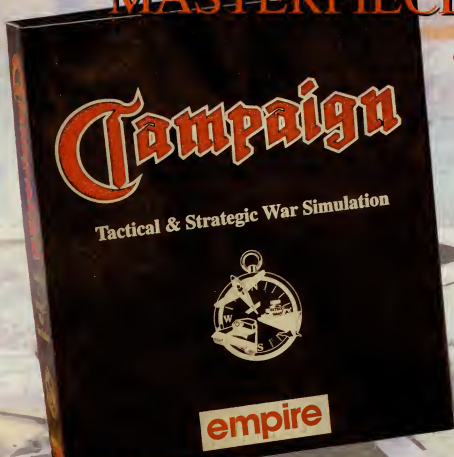

Conquered Kingdoms doesn't break new ground in computer gaming, but it adds an engrossing and fanciful twist to war games.

GP

Hardware requirements: 640K RAM; EGA or VGA graphics; AT running at 12 MHz or faster; hard drive; supports AdLib and Sound Blaster sound cards, disk cache, and Hayes-compatible modem.

WAXWORKS

T. LIAM MCDONALD

When they see *Waxworks*, players familiar with English development team **Horrorsoft** will probably wonder: Where's Elvira? What happened to the bouncy and buxom Mistress of the Dark? After all, we saved her from Cerberus, didn't we? And for our reward we have to fight our way through all of *Waxworks* with nary a heaving bosom or bad pun in sight?

Oh well, the creators of **Accolade**'s *Elvira: Mistress of the Dark* and *Elvira II: The Jaws of*
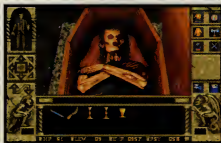
Cerberus must have had a good reason for leaving the Hostess with the Mostest out of their latest role-playing bloodfest. Things are definitely more somber in Waxworks, and more violent: That *PARENTAL WARNING! INTENSE GRAPHIC VIOLENCE!* sticker is no joke. The red stuff flows pretty freely here — making up for the somewhat "dry" *Elvira II* — but amidst all the blood you'll find a riveting, well-crafted game which solidifies Horrorsoft's reputation as king of the horror-gaming market, at least for the time being.

As with the Elvira games, Horrorsoft has crafted a delightful homage to cheesy horror movies and pulp fiction. The plot of *Waxworks* is decidedly convoluted and dopey, but so are the plots of many good horror movies. Indeed, the background story is so extensive that a novella, Richard Moran's "The Curse of the Twins," is bundled with the game. Though a bit choppy and hard to follow, it

gets the player right into the story, which goes something like this:

As children, you and your twin brother Alex used to explore the dark mining tunnels under your Uncle Boris's creepy house — until one day Alex vanished without a trace somewhere in the tunnels. Though he was written off as dead, you still felt strange sympathetic pains and occasionally smelled an odd musty odor reminiscent of your explorations.

Now, years later, your weird Uncle Boris has died. A man with an odd obsession with the grisly and macabre, Uncle Boris spent a lifetime creating the Waxworks, a wax museum/Chamber of Horrors located inside his mansion. The funeral itself is strange enough: Uncle Boris's coffin is sucked through the bottom of his grave and vanishes into the city. And things go from bad to worse when you get a letter from your late uncle laying out the whole sordid story of "The Family Curse."

It seems that one of your ancestors wronged a witch many centuries ago. As witches are wont to do, she immediately laid a curse upon the family, decreeing that in all generations in which twins were born, one twin would be a servant of evil. Uncle Boris's Waxworks is an obsessive re-creation of the family's evil history, with four separate exhibits dedicated to the horrors wrought by the evil twins.

You also learn that your brother Alex is *not* dead, but has instead become a servant of evil, given control of the demons of the past. It's your responsibility to travel through the various "worlds" in the Waxworks,

destroying each evil twin, and finally Alex.

Whew! That's a lot to remember for a game in which you basically travel through mazes chopping things to bits.

A cursed pyramid, a zombie-infested graveyard, a mine acrawl with mutant humanoid-plant creatures, the fog-shrouded streets of Jack the Ripper's Victorian London, and the Waxworks themselves are the battlegrounds for this stylish and satisfying horror game. There are puzzles to be solved, items to be collected, and people to talk to, but in all worlds except one -- Jack the Ripper's London -- hack, slash, and hack some more is the order of the day.

The interface, though streamlined and spiffed up a bit for *Waxworks*, is nearly identical to the one used in the Elvira games. Directional arrows

move you forward, backward, right or left; levels, hit points, and experience points are displayed beneath an easy-to-use assortment of icons which you click on to perform various actions and functions.

But there is something here not found in Horrorsoft's previous two games: Psychic Energy. This enables you to use a crystal-ball icon to contact your late Uncle Boris from beyond the grave. He provides useful

background information on each world, hints, and, in some worlds, healing of your wounds. You expend some Psychic Energy each time you contact him, but this is quickly replenished, and there's a limited range of questions you can ask him anyway. Don't get too excited about the "hints"; they don't come very often, and aren't detailed enough to be much help. Still, it's a nice idea, and maybe in future games it will be implemented extensively enough to be more useful.

There is no magic system per se in *Waxworks*. If brains, brawn, or supernatural help won't get you out of a fix, then

you're sunk. A variety of weapons litters the mazes, much like breadcrumbs left behind by those who came before — except in the rather troublesome Jack the Ripper world, where you *cannot* kill anyone. You simply must avoid detection from a swarm of Bobbies and an enraged mob.

This brings us to the worlds themselves. In a sense, *Waxworks* is four separate games in one, with the Waxworks acting as a shell to link them all together. No items or experience points are carried from world to world. You enter each wax exhibit with nothing, build up strength and inventory along the way, and then are zapped back to the Waxworks when the evil twin is destroyed. Then it's on to the next exhibit. Finishing all four successfully — in no particular order — triggers the endgame, which takes place in the Waxworks world itself.

The easiest world is The Graveyard (where an evil twin commands a horde of the Undead), with The Mines, Jack the Ripper's London, and The Pyramid proving progressively more difficult. Each world has

its own distinctive look, music, and bad guys. Some of the nasties are easy to dispose of (zombies seem to fall apart piece by piece), while others are vexingly hard to kill with normal weapons (the Mine Mutants strike hard and often and are very resilient). The Graveyard is almost *too* easy, with only a handful of useful items, an easily-disposed-of vampire, and a one-two "magical" punch to knock out the baddie.

The Mines are an exercise in resource management. You're given a "sprayer" at the beginning that can vaporize the mutants, living vines, and odd plant-like monsters with unique defenses. The sprayer will run dry all too soon, so using it resourcefully is a must. Playing through once or twice, feeling out the mazes and puzzles as you go, then reloading a saved game and starting afresh is the best way to win here.

Victorian London is an odd change of pace. You gain levels and hit points, but never need them because there is no combat. The world begins with you hunched over the body of the Ripper's latest victim. You need to find the identity of Jack's next victim, then fight him to the death before he can kill her — but all your efforts are hampered by the police and citizenry, who think *you're* the Ripper (as it turns out, you are his twin). It's a 180-degree turn from the rest of the game, and a fresh challenge. That's not to say that the dozens and dozens of screens I sat through in which I was arrested and hung are enjoyable; they most definitely are not, and but the design of the game makes them unfortunately unavoidable.

The Pyramid is extremely large, with assorted number and logic puzzles blocking the ways to the upper levels. You'll need to use a combination of fighting, puzzle-solving, and inventory control to get through safely. Healing comes easily in the pyramid, so combat isn't a big factor until you reach the topmost levels. Once in the pyramid, you have to save a Princess from an Egyptian death cult — led by one of the twins, of course — that wants to sacrifice her. (What else would a cult do with a princess?)

All in all, there's a lot of variety and lot to keep gamers interested in *Waxworks*. The dying-and-reloading schtick gets old fast, but if you save frequently it's a relatively minor nuisance, and there's no place where you can really go astray. Though the graphics aren't quite as slick as gamers are beginning to grow accustomed to, it doesn't seem to matter here.

Like previous Horrorsoft offerings, *Waxworks* has something many games with better technical elements lack: style. No other games look and play quite like these, and straight horror is, for now, a scarce commodity in the gaming world.

With everyone and his uncle developing horror games, Horrorsoft is about to face some stiff competition. Will Horrorsoft remain king of the crypt or will *Waxworks* be a delightful swan-song? I'm sure Elvira would know....

GP

Hardware requirements:
640K RAM; VGA graphics; hard drive; mouse; supports all major sound boards.

DAVID LEADBETTER'S GREENS

STEPHEN POOLE

It appears that 1992 was the year that the folks at **MicroProse** decided to broaden their scope beyond the simulations and strategy games for which they had become famous. First came *Darklands*, a strikingly original FRP set in medieval Germany. While *Darklands* was not without its bugs and minor flaws, it was still a very impressive effort, and proved that Micro-Prose had done its homework thoroughly before entering the crowded FRP market.

Then came *Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender* — another first for MicroProse, this time in the graphic-adventure genre. With its wonderful interface, muted yet colorful graphics, and humorous story, *Rex Nebular* was further proof that MicroProse was serious about expanding its horizons.

(See the *Rex Nebular* review elsewhere in this issue.)

And following fast behind *Rex Nebular* was *David Leadbetter's Greens*, Micro-Prose's debut sports simulation and perhaps the most ambitious of the three. After all, Access's *Links 386 Pro* — with its stunning digitized SVGA graphics, highly customizable viewing options, and ability to "record" a round for someone else to compete against later — is generally considered the ultimate in golfing simulations.

And *Greens* isn't going up against only *Links 386 Pro*.
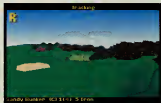
Accolade's *Jack Nicklaus Signature Edition* and Electronic Arts' *PGA Tour Golf for Windows* are both fine games, with their own unique features: *Jack Nicklaus* gives you the option to design your own courses, while *PGA Tour Golf* lets you compete vicariously against PGA pros on a variety of courses on the tour. Neither program has the graphic appeal and sheer realism of *Links 386 Pro* — but their distinctive features means they don't compete head-on with that program.

And that seems to be the approach MicroProse has taken with *Greens*: rather than trying to outdo *Links* in the looks department, *Greens* instead offers features you won't find in any other golf simulation. The result? A highly playable, immensely enjoyable golf sim sure to develop its own following. Players accustomed to *Links* may initially turn up their nose at the graphically plain *Greens*. But if they try it for a couple of rounds, they'll realize that the aphorism "Beauty is only skin deep" applies to PC games, too.

In developing *Greens*, MicroProse turned to golf instructor David Leadbetter. Leadbetter, who competed on the European tour for two years, has coached some of the most successful golfers in recent history, including Nick Faldo, Steve Ballesteros, Tom Watson, Curtis Strange, and Ian Baker-Finch. His expertise permeates the game and the manual, making *Greens* instructional as well as entertaining. Experienced linksters may already know many of the tips and pointers he brings to the proceedings, but even they will appreciate the quality and amount of material included here. And novice or intermediate players will find the info both useful and easy to understand.

Greens comes with six courses: Ballybrook, Buckland Heath, Mountsummer Point, St. Augustine, Dunedin Country Club, and the Donald Ross Memorial Course. Each course presents its own challenges — from the hilly fairways and dangerous sloping greens of the Donald Ross Memorial to the deadly trees surrounding many of the greens of Mountsummer Point to the watery dangers of Ballybrook. There's a lot of variety in the courses, and it gives *Greens* excellent replay potential. The only thing lacking is any history and description of each course, a feature curiously absent in an otherwise thorough game manual.

You begin *Greens* by creating a golfer — you decide on name, gender, shirt color, club selection, and whether to be novice golfer or handicap player. Choose the latter, and he or she will begin play with a 28 handicap; stay below 28 over par on your first outing, and the handicap begins its downward descent. If you've ever played a

PC golf simulation, you'll probably get it down to 10 or so after three or four rounds. Becoming a scratch player won't come nearly as easily, but the satisfaction of seeing your handicap shrink is more than enough incentive to keep you plugging away.

Greens offers the greatest variety of game types we've seen in a golf sim. You'll find singles, fourball, fourball, bestball three and four, three-somes, foursomes, tournaments, skins game, head-to-head competition against computer opponents, and more. The inclusion of so many game types is testimony to the care MicroProse took to make *Greens* inviting — even after you've become a par golfer and have familiarized yourself with all the courses, *Greens* can still hold a challenge. Multiple human opponents and a modem option give *Greens* even more depth.

After selecting a course and game type, it's time to head out for a round. Instead of the overhead views most golf games present you with before a shot, *Greens* precedes each stroke with the Isometric View — an oblique, reversible perspective which you use to determine shot direction as well as to calculate distances to bunkers and dog-legs.

You view the actual shot from behind your golfer. Before beginning your swing, you can opt to change several parameters, including tee height and placement, club selection, and the position of your feet in relation to the ball. You can also change your stance — opening it for more stability when hitting from an awkward lie, for example.

The swing meter (or Swingometer, as it's dubbed here) operates on the same principles as the ones found in nearly every other golf sim, but the presentation is slightly different. Using a semi-circular gauge (similar to the *Links* system), you click to begin your backswing, the strength of which is indicated by a blue line moving upward along the outside of the gauge. Click again to set both strength and send a red line moving downward, and once more to stop the red line, determining whether the shot is straight, draws, or fades.

But here's the difference: As the blue line moves upward, the white area at the bottom of the meter — the "sweet spot," where you click the third and final time — begins to shrink. The harder you hit the ball, the smaller the sweet spot; overswing, and you've got a *very* small area you must nail to avoid shanking, hooking, or slicing. Other golf sims determine trajectory and distance the same way, but this is the clearest presentation of the mechanics of a golf swing.

Graphically, putting is handled in a more conventional manner. A grid can be superimposed over the green, and you can analyze your shot from a ball-to-hole, hole-to-ball, or side view. A horizontal power bar is used to determine putting strength; a vertical check mark in the middle of the bar is used to indicate the optimum strength for the distance you must cover if you were putting on a perfectly flat surface. Any putting interface takes some getting used to, but once you've grown accustomed to this one you can exploit it quite well. Still, achieving consistency on the green is just as tough here as it is in real life.

Throughout play, David Leadbetter will pop up with advice and info. Some of his recommendations may seem trite, but other bits of wisdom are more appreciated: "That's only the second fairway you've missed today," or "You're tending to underhit approach shots with this club." And a "TV" announcer often pops up after shots, with comments such as "Good club selection" or "Solid bunker play."

The polygon graphics — some textured, some not — are the weakest part of the *Greens* presentation. Golfers are blocky and pixelated, trees are rather crudely depicted, and greens appear to be layered in two-toned Stars of David. On the other hand, the polygons create a great "relief map" look — rolling fairways, deep bunkers, and treacherous gullies all have

a true 3-D appearance.

Which brings up another of *Greens'* unique features: the numerous 3-D viewing perspectives. Seven "camera" angles give you the chance to see shots as you never have before, either in real life, on television, or in another golf sim. These viewing perspectives don't necessarily give you great insight into why your ball is taking the path it is, but at the very least it keeps *Greens* visually fresh.

Greens doesn't do everything perfectly. Competing against computer opponents can be maddening: I played three rounds on different courses against "Sandy Bunker," the weakest of the bunch, and she shot 11 under twice and 12 under once — course records all. Sound effects are sparse, the view from behind the golfer is nearly useless in

most cases, and the scrolling of the terrain is decidedly choppy on anything less than a 386/25.

Greens does not supplant *Links 386 Pro* as the most realistic golf sim, but that's not really the issue. The real question is whether or not *Greens* is worth buying, and the answer is unquestionably yes. After you've explored its many options, in fact, you'll probably decide it's a more than worthy neighbor to *Links 386 Pro* on your hard drive.

GP

Hardware requirements: 2MB RAM; VGA/MCGA graphics; hard drive; DOS 5.0; supports all major sound boards, joystick, and mouse (recommended).

PACIFIC WAR

JEFF SEIKEN

In board-gaming parlance, there's a breed of war game known as the "monster." Monster war games are easily identified by their heft, packaged in a suitcase-sized box stuffed with enough mapsheets to carpet your family room — plus a few thousand counters to keep all those maps in place. As you can imagine, this kind of game is for dedicated souls only.

The genre of PC war games has its share of monsters, too, but they're much more difficult to spot immediately. Instead of five pounds' worth of paper and cardboard, there might be no more than a single disk and a manual in the box. So how do you recognize a monster? Primarily by the playing time. If the longest scenario tops the 100-hour mark, then you know you have a monster on your hands.

By this definition, Gary Grigsby's *Western Front* and

Second Front, both published by SSI, certainly qualify as monsters. But as big and involved as those two titles are, they're dwarfed by his latest creation, *Pacific War*. With *Pacific War*, Grigsby has created the mother of all monsters. It's a truly impressive achievement, no less for its exceptional playability than for its scope.

Pacific War simulates World War II in the Pacific from start to finish — not with broad brush strokes, but with the sort of exacting detail that's the trademark of a Grigsby design.
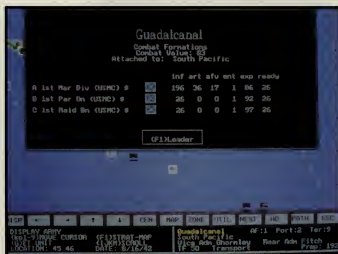
Like the two *Front* games which precede it, *Pacific War* omits or ignores very little. Every ship, from the stateliest carrier to the lowliest torpedo boat, along with every plane and squad, is accounted for in the order-of-battle. The arena of conflict is similarly all-inclusive, stretching from California in the east to Calcutta in the west, and from the Aleutians in the north to Australia in the south. Last but not least, game turns represent a week of real time, which adds up to something around under 200 turns for the whole shebang. Thankfully, the program also includes a host of shorter scenarios for the benefit of those interested in the WWII Pacific theater but who don't relish the thought of refighting the entire war.

In war games, complexity often goes hand-in-hand with size, and *Pacific War* is no exception. But the game is by no means as intimidating as it first appears to be. In fact, once you learn your way around the menus, you'll find that it's less laborious to play than either *Western Front* or *Second Front*, thanks to its flexible system of command control. Every ship, squadron, and land unit at your disposal is assigned to a specific headquarters. Each headquarters (and all of its subordinate units) can in turn be placed

in one of three command modes: full-player control, full-computer control, or operational computer control. The first two options are pretty much self-explanatory; in the third, the player determines the overall objective for the headquarters, while the computer moves the HQ's units in order to best fulfill that goal.

This setup essentially allows you to choose exactly how big a chunk of the fighting you want to bite off. You can try to micro-manage the conflict in every theater, or you can pick one or two key command spots and let the computer worry about the rest. At the same time, however, your ability to set objectives for HQs under the computer's operational control ensures that everyone will adhere to your strategic plan for the war. It's a terrific system, one that would have made the *Front* games much more manageable.

While headquarters occupy the top spot on the chain of command, actual orders are issued to individual squadrons, land units, and naval task forces. Unlike most war games, though, your orders are more like a set of instructions or guidelines than specific commands. What transpires during the ensuing turn depends to a large degree on the leaders
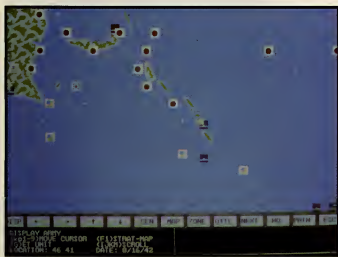
in the field, as well as the actions of the enemy. For instance, ground units can be told to attack, but whether they will actually carry through with their orders hinges on the aggressiveness of the units' commander and the level of opposition they encounter. With carrier and land-based air support, you can pick the type of target to be bombed, but the planes may go after something else if a more tempting target materializes.

Once you've finished dispensing orders, the computer simultaneously carries out the commands for both sides. Task forces may be sighted as they move, generating response moves by enemy task forces. Air strikes and counterstrikes may be launched, surface engagements may occur — all you can do is watch.

And there's the rub. During the orders-execution phase, you're reduced to the role of bystander, gnawing on your knuckles while the computer crunches the numbers and relays the results. This wouldn't be so hard to bear if the stakes weren't so high. Within the space of a single turn, the fortunes of war can shift radically. Historically, all of the major carrier battles lasted a week or less; at Midway, in fact, Japan lost the cream of her carrier fleet

— and with it any chance of winning the war — in a matter of minutes. The same thing can happen in *Pacific War*, and it's supremely frustrating to feel so helpless as these potentially decisive battles are taking place.

Yet this sense of being distanced from the action is also supremely realistic. In *Pacific War*, you represent the top brass for each side, leaders like Nimitz, Tojo, Halsey, and Yamamoto. As such, you direct the planning and commit your forces to battle, but once you set an operation in motion, your input is at an end. It then falls to the commanders on the spot to implement your orders successfully.

When it comes to strategy, players may at first feel completely out to sea, not so much because of the scale of the game as due to the unique nature of the Pacific Theater. Unlike the struggle in Europe, the two sides here do not face each other across well-defined battle lines. Simply getting your troops into contact with the enemy is an intricate business, requiring the close coordination of task forces for transport, supply, escort, and air support.

Once again, though, the game system lightens the command load. Many functions, such as determining the composition of a task force or as-

sembling landing craft for an amphibious operation, can be handled automatically by the computer. The tutorial in the manual also deserves praise. It gets you into the game with a minimum of confusion while delivering a surprisingly comprehensive introduction to most of the design's main concepts.

Odd though it may sound, *Pacific War* has much of the same flavor as chess. Like chess, the game tends to center around a few critical pieces — the Japanese and American aircraft carriers — the loss of which can be decisive. During play, there's a real sense of move and countermove, as each side weighs when and where to risk its priceless carriers. The overwhelming importance of these units keeps the excitement level high, since the fate of the war will often seem to be riding on the outcome of

each carrier clash.

On a related theme, *Pacific War* also drives home the crucial role played by land-based aircraft. In one sense, the war in the Central and South Pacific was an extended battle for island air bases. Each side strove to establish air bases that could interdict the enemy's lines of supply and communications, as well as shield its own. One of the reasons carriers were so valuable was that they functioned as mobile air bases, able to project air power into areas where friendly bases were lack-

ing, *Pacific War* highlights these strategic realities with splendid clarity. After playing the game you will never again wonder why Japan and the U.S. fought so long and hard over Guadalcanal.

Gamers who crave competition with a flesh-and-blood opponent will be pleased by another feature of *Pacific War*. It accommodates modem play. After entering your orders for a turn, you can save your move and send your opponent the save-game file via modem. Only one player will be able to watch the actual orders execution phase, but the other can get all the pertinent information through detailed battle reports available during the next turn's orders phase.

Pacific War is Grigsby's magnum opus. Building on the foundation of his previous designs, he has crafted a game that is familiar in form, yet original, innovative, and quite exciting in its particulars. To be honest, a game of this scope really warrants a good 50 to 100 hours of play before judgment can be passed on how well its many different facets — the economic aspects, the combat algorithms, the quality of its artificial intelligence, to name a few — fit together. But *Pacific War* is one of the few games to which I would be willing to devote just such a huge chunk of my leisure time. Is there any higher recommendation?

GP

AMAZON: GUARDIANS OF EDEN

BERNIE YEE

Beginning with the groundbreaking *Mean Streets*, the hallmark feature of Access's graphic adventures has been the incorporation of digitized graphics and speech. That tra-

dition continues with *Amazon: Guardians of Eden*, but in this latest release Access has attempted to season its trademark look with some B-movie magic.

In this romp through the rainforest, you assume the role of Jason Roberts, whose globe-hopping brother Allen has apparently discovered the secret of missing Aztec jewels before disappearing deep into the Amazonian jungle. The mystery heightens when you receive

a message from your brother, instructing you to gather your belongings and head south of the border. And to make things even more intriguing, he seems to be somehow involved in some supernatural goings-on! Naturally, the ubiquitous bad guys are one step behind (or ahead of) you as you attempt to locate your brother and.

Amazon is unabashedly based on those old B-movie serial adventures in which the hero uncovered mysterious and treacherous schemes in order to recover lost treasures. The concept is the same as in mov-

ies like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, and while it's not really fair to judge a PC game in relation to a movie, the storyline makes comparisons almost unavoidable. Unfortunately, *Amazon* isn't as successful as those films at creating the wonderfully campy feel of those bygone Saturday matinees.

Part of the blame for this is the emphasis on the serial format that old movies and shows relied on to keep viewers on the edge of their seats. You know the motif: Our hero ventures into the unknown, only to be stopped by some dastardly villain or cataclysmic disaster which threatens his life. Will he escape? Of course he will, but you had to wait until the next episode to find out how.

In an attempt to duplicate the formula, Access has broken *Amazon* up into "chapters." Each chapter ends at a cliffhanger, followed by a little graphics fade, a new chapter title page, a replay of the last event leading up to the cliffhanger, and a chance to play
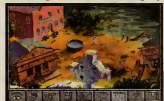
your way out of the mess you just landed in. This cliffhanger effect works well at first, but after replaying the puzzles several times the scheme wears out

its welcome.

Any untimely demise your character suffers is preceded by a shock warning; like the chapter divisions, the shock warning works well initially, but af-

ter a couple of viewings only adds to the monotony of replaying certain segments of the game. Luckily, the puzzles are not particularly difficult, but some do require you to find a solution in real time — or else. And there's no option to immediately reload a saved game after your hero buys the farm.

Amazon is a good-looking game, however, and it even includes an option to let you toggle between standard VGA or SVGA during game play. The SVGA graphics are certainly more detailed, but in this mode the screen is split into a graphic display of your location and an inventory screen (and a fair chunk is given over to a background pattern). On a 14" monitor, the text on the dual display of the SVGA screens is almost unreadable, and the graphic window is *very* small.

The digitized graphics used for closeups of characters are generally quite satisfying, but some of the actors look a

little out of place. The bartender in the little town in Peru, for example, will probably remind you more of a beer-swilling caucasian couch potato from Elmhurst rather than an unsavory Latino character from Peru.

The soundtrack is another bow to the suspenseful B-movie genre, and certainly adds to the atmosphere. It can get a bit repetitive, but that's true of the music in many games, and on the whole the music serves to add ambience rather than detract from your pleasure. The sound effects are digitized, as are various key speech segments throughout the game. (Access plans a CD-ROM version of *Amazon*, enhanced with more speech as well as extra graphics.)

Perhaps the most problematic area of the game is the interface. Along the bottom of the screens is a horizontal row of icon buttons. Clicking on a

button switches the cursor to that icon, which you can then use on a person or object in the display screen. There's the multi-functional "use," take, talk, move, climb, inventory, and exit (to leave a location).

There's nothing inherently wrong with the design; after all,

this interface and its derivatives rule the graphic-adventure roost, from Les Manley to Roger Wilco. The problem is in the execution. Because *Amazon* seems to lack the "auto-navigation" intelligence of Sierra games, which send your character around any intervening obstacles, moving to a precise location can require some very accurate mouse-clicks. You might find it easier to use the directional arrows to walk around in many of the locations.

The main displays are well-done, but sometimes a little cluttered. Finding the switch, key, bicycle pump (hint, hint!), or other important item can be a little like looking for a pixel in a haystack. A wise adventurer saves often, but *everyone* should save before proceeding to the next chapter: You might find yourself lacking an important item, and the only way to go back and get it is to load an earlier chapter.

An especially thoughtful feature is Access's inclusion of an on-line help facility, which may eliminate your need for an after-market hint book. One of the icon buttons is a question mark — click on that, then click on an object and you'll get some hints for what to do next. Every time you use the help feature, your game "IQ" is lowered, clearly an incentive to solve problems on your own rather than constantly asking for solutions.

Amazon is replete with humorous asides, paying homage

not only to B-movies but also pop culture in general. And you get to play from the perspective of Maya, your hero's female sidekick who offers a different perspective on things. One puzzle requires that you use *both* their talents to survive — a nice touch.

Amazon has the same installation procedure that Access developed for *Martian Memorandum*, and it's the best I've seen. Rather than forcing you to sit on your hands until it's time to put in a new disk, *Amazon* presents you with rainforest trivia, along with a handsome graphical display of everything involved with installation.

All in all, *Amazon* is a good-looking, good-sounding game. It boasts several features that other developers would do well to take note of, but still the game is strangely rough around the edges. Considering the strides made in the PC-gaming market

— and given Access' excellent track record — it's somewhat surprising that the real challenge of *Amazon* lies in its interface rather than its puzzles.

Nostalgia is nice, but that alone isn't enough to carry a game. *Amazon* is a testament to the difficulty of orchestrating effective multimedia presentations and melding various disparate influences of movies and literature into gaming. Still, if someone's going to get there first, Access just may be the company to do it.

GP

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REX NEBULAR AND THE COSMIC GENDER BENDER

STEPHEN POOLE

THIS IS MY BLACKJACK!

The hero of **MicroProse**'s first graphic adventure is bound to be compared to Roger Wilco, the star of Sierra's Space Quest games. After all, both are amiable intergalactic wayfarers, trying to get through life with as little hassle as possible, yet somehow managing to entangle themselves in some pretty dangerous situations.

But don't think for a minute that *Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender* is a Space Quest clone. It might take its cue from Roger Wilco's adventures, but once you look past the surface similarities you'll see that *Rex Nebular* is very much its own game — and an outstanding

one at that. *Rex* has been carefully crafted to ensure that it's immensely friendly and enjoyable: the challenges lie in the puzzles, not the configuration procedure or user interface. It's definitely a top contender for a 1992 Game Players award, a distinction that's even more remarkable when you consider that this is MicroProse's first graphic adventure.

MicroProse has done everything right with *Rex Nebular*, from the stylish box art to its thorough and informative manual (which even goes so far as to provide several CONFIG.SYS files that will help the game perform at its best on your system). Several members of the *Rex* design team have worked previously on graphic adventures for other companies, and it's clear that their ex-

perience went a long way toward preventing the sort of flaws that can mar a debut into an uncharted genre.

To get into the devil-may-care mindset of our hero, check out the "Voice-Activated Auto-Transcribing Log" bundled with the game. Written by award-winning game designer Steve Meretzky (who himself possesses something of a devil-may-care mindset), the Log fills you in on Rex's occupation (basically an interstellar courier/adventurer), and fleshes out the little fellow you'll be moving around on-screen: He's no stranger to demon rum (several log entries are made before or after binges), he's a sucker for a pretty girl, and he'll jump at the chance to pick up some quick cash. In addition, the log tells of some of Rex's previous misadventures, provides a few clues (none essential) regarding useful items aboard ship, and supplements the game's introductory sequence.

Meretzky's writing is occasionally sophomoric — reference is made to the planet Flatulus, a gas giant — but there's also some pretty funny stuff here, particularly the dialogue between Rex and his fawning, servile Robo-Butler. When Rex asks the Robo-

Butler to get a "business acquaintance" on the phone, for example, the robot responds, "At once, master, apologizing in advance for the countless mistakes I will surely make in carrying out even this simple task."

The introduction, replete
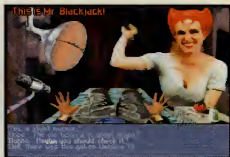
with digitized voices and some nifty 3-D space-flight animation, is refreshingly unique. We see Rex returning to collect payment for recovering an ancient vase from Terra Androgena, a planet which had "vanished" 150 years earlier. As he collects his money, Colonel Stone, the eccentric tycoon who
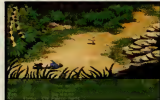
hired Rex, asks him if he ran into any trouble. Rex then recounts finding the planet (it turns out it's merely cloaked), being attacked by a hostile ship, and crash-landing in a lake on the planet surface. Only then do you step into the picture and take control.

Once you've scoured the

ship and taken every possible item (the latter task being the Prime Directive of adventure gaming), you can head out through the airlock into the lake. Keep your eyes on the bottom as you enjoy the crystal-clear waters — you're looking

for an object you'll need in order to get past a sea serpent with a taste for marooned astronauts. From there it's through a cave and out onto the planet surface — now it's time for the *real* adventure.

After you encounter a lovely female native who keeps calling you a "transmorph" and expresses some apprehension as to whether you're a "real" man, you begin to have suspicions about male-female rela-

tions on the planet. Using a teleporter, you materialize in a vast underground complex, where you're immediately taken prisoner by some *very* pushy ladies.

Gradually, you learn why the native on the planet surface said you couldn't be a real man — and it's got nothing to do with whether or not you eat quiche. Around the time the planet vanished, a full-scale war broke out between the sexes, with the females achieving victory by means of a biological weapon that killed only men. To keep their race alive, the females created the Gender Bender, a device which transforms women to men, and vice-versa.

The effects of the Gender Bender are highly unstable, however, and those who undergo the process can revert to their original sex at any time, making reproduction a hit-or-miss affair at best. And women who'd spent years trying to rid themselves of men didn't exactly relish the thought of be-

coming male even for short periods. You quickly realize that, unless you escape, you'll become breeding stock for a race of man-haters. Finding the vase you set out for is the last thought on your mind — but that's what you'll need to do to finish the game.

To roam about the complex and find much-needed ingredients, you'll have to disguise yourself as a woman. Several previous graphic adventures have let you control both male and female characters, but thanks to the Gender Bender *Rex Nebular* is the first game where a single character is both a man *and* a woman.

While the animation of the transformation scenes won't blow you away, it's still pretty impressive, and, like the flashback technique used in the introduction, highly unique.

Some of the puzzles in *Rex Nebular* — retrieving your binoculars from a thieving monkey, for instance, or figuring out what code to use in the teleporter that takes you to the underground complex — are fairly simple. Many others, though, are deliciously difficult, often requiring you to return to locations you thought you wouldn't need to revisit in order to fetch a vital object to be used in yet *another* locale.

This is especially true after you escape the underground complex and journey to Machopolis, the city constructed by the male Androgenans during the war. Nearly every spot you visit there contains an object that must be used somewhere else in order to solve an entirely different

problem. There aren't any red herrings to speak of, so if you're diligent, attentive, and logical, you'll eventually come through with flying colors. *Rex* can be played on one of three difficulty levels, so if you're having trouble on the toughest level you can always give it a go on the easy setting — you might even pick up a free hint.

Some of the action in *Rex* is sexually suggestive (there's even a topless scene — ooh la la!), but there aren't too many gamers who'll be offended by this stuff. If you feel like Rex's "close encounter" with the friendly native on the planet surface isn't the sort of thing you want to see in an adventure game, you can always play the game in Nice mode. There's also a Locked Nice mode for par-

ents with kids around the house, but to get back to Naughty mode you have to re-install the game.

While you're stretching your brain trying to stay alive and find that vase, you can admire some very handsome graphics. The muted colors and broad strokes create a perfect backdrop for the zany situations and strange characters you meet. The rotoscoping used to create Rex's various movements — swimming, walking, climbing, and so on — has resulted in amazingly realistic animation, especially for a graphic adventure. Although screen changes are a bit slow on a 386/SX, the animation seems to remain

fairly constant regardless of processing speed.

My only gripe with the game — and it's fairly minor — involves driving through the city of Machopolis. Driving is handled automatically, but on slower PCs these sequences can really slow down the action. An option to toggle off the driving animation would be much appreciated.

Even utilitarian tasks such as saving and loading games are handled in a way that reflects an obvious concern to make every aspect of *Rex* pleasant. The number of saved games is limited only by the free space on your hard drive; you can use up to 50 characters to describe each game; and should you quit playing *without* saving your game, the program

thoughtfully does it for you.

Rex Nebular is the perfect example of how a graphic adventure can be challenging for veterans, inviting to newcomers, and satisfying to both. It looks great, sounds great, plays great — and there's not much more you could ask for in a game.

GP

REALMS

T. LIAM MCDONALD

This **Virgin** release — which for all practical purposes is their version of *Populous* — is a fantasy-god-cum-military-strategy game that breaks all the records for being extremely, intensely, and unfailingly average.

It's hard to tell just what the designers of this game wanted it to be. If you took *The Ancient Art of War*, *Civilization* and *The Lord of the Rings*, mixed them together, and simplified the results, you'd probably get a game like *Realms*.

The premise, such as it is, has something to do with the divine inspiration of a new king to lead his people to victory. There's a smattering — a very *small* smattering — of Nordic mythology chucked into the manual, but it has little to do with game play, and is actually quite confusing; since the player can assume the realm of any one of several races at the beginning of play, why the Nordic trappings? The races, taken liberally from every fantasy game and novel of this century, are standard fare: Orcs, Elves, Amazons, Dwarves, Barbarians...you get the picture.
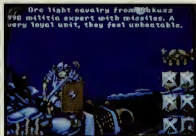
The introduction is supposed to represent a Viking funeral and the new king's assumption of power, but after that the game focuses squarely on city management and military strategy. There are nine worlds available, each offering a new topography and different alignment of friends and foes.

Each world can be played from different sides, so there are quite a few scenarios that can be fought.

One drawback that's immediately noticeable is that the map of the entire realm is only half a screen wide, with the rest of the screen taken up by a non-interactive graphic "shell." It's handsome, but much of the space it takes up could have been put to better use.

A series of screens offers progressively more detailed views of the turf, from the whole realm to the area surrounding the city to the city itself and the battleground. The icons are sparse and easy to identify: locate troops, check tax rates, scroll through units, or zoom into an area of ground. The ground closeups look a heck of a lot like a stripped-down *Populous*, but enough said.

Inside each city there are

options to build, acquire land, buy grain, improve health, or collect taxes. If there are enough people (and money) in the city, troops can be trained and outfitted with a fair selection of weapons and armor.

Enemies waste no time in laying siege to these cities, so armies must be raised immediately. When the opposing troops clash, it's time for combat mode. A handful of options allow projectile volleys, a few attack formations, and control over direction of troops. The interface offers effective control, but it's very reminiscent of *The Ancient Art of War*: Like the

ground closeups mentioned earlier, we've seen it before.

Keeping track of time is nearly impossible because there are no reference points except when a year rolls over. Messages appear in a crystal ball to

tell of affairs elsewhere in the realm, but they disappear with mind-numbing rapidity (I clocked one message at under a second), and they can't be retrieved. Thanks to these two anomalies, the best way to know when you need more grain for cities is to learn that your people are dying from starvation. And while you're making those critical command decisions, the enemy is cleaning your clock. Oh, and don't hit the escape key: it drops you to DOS without even a goodbye.

In short, the concept behind *Realms* is interesting if not unique, and better execution could have made it at least a fairly enjoyable affair. But poor design decisions and ho-hum graphics, combined with concepts borrowed from earlier (and better) games, make *Realms* almost an anachronism.

GP

Hardware requirements: 640K RAM; VGA, EGA, or Tandy graphics; 286 or better; supports AdLib and Roland sound boards; mouse recommended.

TOM LANDRY STRATEGY FOOTBALL

STEPHEN POOLE

Merit's latest release isn't the biggest, fanciest gridiron game on the market. But though it lacks the frills of some other recent releases, *Tom Landry Strategy Football* is one of the

most satisfying and highly playable football strategy games available.

Thanks to an intelligent design, you can hit the field with *Tom Landry Strategy Football* after a mere glance at the instruction manual. Every option on the main menu is clearly defined, and if you have any questions just refer to the online help system. With 24 topics covering everything from scouting and pass coverages to offensive formations and how to play via modem, *TLSF*'s help system is one of the best I've seen.

TLSF doesn't have an NFL license, but the 28 teams all represent franchise cities (the Rams are called "Anaheim" to avoid being confused with the Raiders), with rosters and player ratings based on the 1991-92 season. Player names are thinly disguised, so fans should have no problem recognizing who's who. Vikings fans, for example, will immediately realize that Cannon, Cartier, and Jogger represent Rich Gannon, Anthony Carter, and Herschel Walker.

Select two teams, then access a detailed scouting report on the opposition. The scouting report rates offensive and defensive players from one to ten in several categories, and also gives you a rundown on offensive play-calling tendencies based on situation—how often

your opponent passes on, say, third and eight at midfield.

Once the game starts, you'll discover that playcalling is blessedly easy—but not at the expense of strategic depth. This ease of use is a direct result of a fantastic interface which closely resembles the one found in *John Madden '93* for the Sega Genesis.

There's no arcade option here—as coach, you simply call plays and watch the action. Seven offensive formations—Pro Set, Pro I, Brown (good running formation), One Back, Run and Shoot, Shotgun, and Short Yardage—are available. Running plays are broken up into middle, inside, and outside runs; pass plays are divided into standard passes (short, medium, and long) and finesse passes (screen, flea flicker, halfback pass, and Hail Mary).

Calling a play is a simple matter of choosing a formation, then a type of play, then the play itself. For example, you might pick Pro I, medium pass, hook pattern, then designate a primary receiver. All plays include an option for a man in motion; pass plays can be run as play actions, and on long passes you can designate a "hot receiver" your QB can dump the ball off to if the pass rush gets hot.

The playbook may seem somewhat scanty, but changing formations alters the holes runners hit and the patterns receivers run. I often pick the actual play first, then cycle through the formations to see how running and pass routes change.

The animation in *TLSF* is as good as any PC football game around (you actually see blitzing defenders take off before the snap), and the inclusion of correct team colors, though a small detail, adds much to the atmosphere. Penalties and turnovers occur approximately as often as in real life, and often

change the course of a game. (There is no delay of game penalty, though—you can mull over your decisions as long as you like.)

TLSF could use a few enhancements. There's no option to play an entire season (though you could manually create a schedule and play it out game by game, without animation, letting the computer coach all the teams except yours.) When blitzing, there's no way to send a single linebacker of your choice; safety and cornerback blitzes are also absent. You can't select which back will be used in one-back formations (aside from putting in his sub, whose role is similarly predetermined). An editor for player names and ratings would be nice, as would

a mode for creating or editing plays. And the graphic representation of some weather conditions would make *TLSF* more aesthetically pleasing.

Even with these shortcomings, I find myself coming back to *TLSF* again and again. If a *Landry II* comes out with these enhancements, it will be well on its way to becoming the MVP of PC football strategy games.

GP

Hardware requirements: 640K RAM; VGA graphics; hard disk; high-density disk drives; 286/12 MHz or better; mouse; supports Ad Lib and Sound Blaster sound cards.

THE ANCIENT ART OF WAR IN THE SKIES

LEE BUCHANAN

This **MicroProse** game won't appeal to war gamers or flight-sim fanatics who want nothing less than total realism — but that's not its goal. *The Ancient Art of War in the Skies* strikes a wonderful balance between arcade antics and battlefield strategy. MicroProse bills *AAWS* as "the *Fun* World War I game of strategy and action," and that description is right on the mark.

The premise is simple enough: As either the British or Germans, use your bombers and fighters to support the foot soldiers in the trenches. Did you say that aircraft played a neg-

ligible role in the outcome of the war? Well, that's OK for the history books — but in *AAWS* airplanes are as important as trenches, barbed wire, and machine guns.

You can bomb enemy positions along the front or hit various targets including factories, airfields, depots, cities, and the enemy capital. Nine scenarios and a campaign editor give the game a lot of flexibility and replay potential.

As supreme commander of air power, you assign pilots and targets. When confrontations occur, you can either jump in and resolve them in arcade sequences or wait for the computer to do battle and report back with the results.

The arcade sequences include several types of dogfights or bombing runs. Take over in a dogfight and you're in control of a plane battling one or more of the enemy; jump into a bomber, and you can lob shells at targets while evading anti-aircraft fire.

Hardcore PC pilots may gasp when they find they're not in the cockpit for the dogfight scenes, but instead watching from a 2-D side view. My advice would be to lighten up — after all, it's only a game, and like almost everything else in *AAWS* the dogfight sequences are fun to play and a delight to watch. Bombing runs are handled in similar arcade fashion, with the player timing the release of bombs while looking down at the targets.

The battlefield map is where you'll find the best (and most useful) graphic touches. Watch the troops in the front-line trenches waver, retreat, or advance as you send bombers out in support of your infantry. Buildings are reduced to rubble and the battleground becomes scarred from the fighting — *AAWS*'s gorgeous map is so handsome that it will probably have war gamers drooling for a complex simulation with a similar look and feel.

Nearly activity in the game can be accessed while watching the fighting unfold on the main map. From here you can order fighter squadrons to intercept enemy bombers, or unleash a bombing campaign on the enemy capital.

The interface is graceful and the action is very fluid. Step

into the fray whenever you like, or just stay in the role of general and direct the campaign. In fact, since controlling the arcade sequences increases your side's chance of winning, staying on the sidelines often makes the computer a more even match.

The Ancient Art of War in the Skies makes excellent use of major sound boards, especially in the digitized speech of the enemy commander. When you choose your opponent, his picture is accompanied by clever speech that gives you some idea of what strategy he'll pursue. Lose the battle, and you'll en-

dure some derisive comments from your foe.

But don't worry if things get a bit nasty. As the box promises, this game aims to deliver *fun* — and it scores a direct hit.

GP

Hardware requirements: 640K RAM; VGA/MCGA graphics; hard drive; supports AdLib, Roland, Sound Blaster, and Sound Master sound cards, mouse recommended.

UTOPIA

JEFF LUNDRIGAN

Imagine being given total control of a developing planet, with several hundred colonists depending on you to make sure everything runs smoothly, and you've got a good idea of the basic concept behind *Utopia*.

You begin with a few buildings, a hundred or so colonists, and enough startup capital to take care of your immediate needs. But you and your colonists aren't the only ones trying to make a go of it; elsewhere on the planet is a rival city run by hostile aliens, and consequently you must split your meager resources between making your colony grow and preparing for its defense.

Developed by **Gremlin Graphics Software** and published by **Konami**, *Utopia* is another game that gives you life-and-death control over "little people." It's sort of a cross between *Populous*, *SimCity*, and *Civilization*, but unlike those classics the goals are just too loosely defined. You're told there's an alien threat you must eventually eliminate, but you never get to see any of your opponents. The alien city isn't even shown on the map — your spies simply tell you that it's located to the southeast, for example, or to the west.

Depending on how much money you can spare for spying operations, in fact, you may never even see what an alien *looks* like. When you've built enough military hardware to mount an attack, your forces trundle off the edge of the playing field, into the void, and a text box pops up to tell you the results. Granted, the text is often amusing, with lurid descriptions of aliens wailing in the darkness as their civilization is crushed. But it would be much more interesting to control the battle, or at least watch it happen.

Besides wiping out the bad guys, most of your time is spent in the mundane task of constructing colony buildings: power stations, housing, factories, mines, and so on. You're supposed to be working toward a high "Quality of Life" rating — i.e., make everybody as happy as possible — but there isn't much challenge involved. Getting a rating of 90 percent or better isn't easy, but you can just keep things going with a rating in the high 70s to low 80s without much effort.

You must provide colonists with adequate supplies of food, air, housing, etc., but as long as you keep an eye on the population and plan ahead, it isn't tough to keep things running. (Conveniently enough, if you fall behind you can simply lower the birth rate until you have sufficient resources.) Construction takes a *lot* of time though, and long stretches of the game are spent simply waiting for things to get built.

The aliens attack periodically, sometimes posing a serious threat. Some of the difficulty in dealing with them, however, is inherent in the game design. The system for handling military forces is awkward, to say the least: you switch to the World Map, place one of eight markers on the spot where you want a tank or airship to move to, switch back to the Main World View, find the unit you want to move, then click on it and tell it to go to the numbered marker. In the meantime, the enemy is moving away from the area, and there's no guarantee your tank won't run into a mountain or other obstacle and come to a dead stop.

Even stationary weapons, like laser turrets, aren't all that reliable. When first constructed,

turrets constantly revolve, looking for enemies. When they find one, though, they stop revolving and remain fixed in the direction they fired. While you can turn them manually to face new enemies, there doesn't seem to be any way to put them back into automatic mode.

In many ways, *Utopia* is satisfying: colorful, nice to look at, and mildly challenging. But when you consider that its direct competition includes some classic games, that's really not good enough.

GP

SUMMER CHALLENGE

JEFF LUNDRIGAN

Accolade's *Summer Challenge* is just that: challenging. The game spotlights a variety of athletic events, and it's extremely doubtful that *anyone* will complete any event successfully on their first try; in fact, some events may require as many as 30 or 40 attempts before you realize any degree of success.

The countries of the world have sent their finest athletes to

compete in contests of speed, skill, and endurance. After years of training, you've arrived to put your years of training to the test. (Because of complicated and expensive licensing agreements, this conglomeration of events isn't actually called the Olympics, but these are indeed all Olympic events.)

The eight events — archery, equestrian, kayaking, 400-meter hurdles, pole vault, high jump, javelin, and cycling — represent a good cross-section of athletic skills. A few favorites (swimming, diving, and the various gymnastic events, to name a few) are noticeably absent, but overall *Summer Challenge* offers an excellent mix of competitions.

The events are all presented in rich 256-color VGA, with digitized competitors and highly detailed, smooth character animation. In a word, it looks *great*. This is track and field for those who are used to watching it on television, with an angled perspective from

behind and slightly above the athletes. The controls are a little different for each event, but most require you to use the tried-and-true method punching a keyboard or joystick button as fast as you can to get up to speed, then hitting some other button at exactly the right moment to perform the appropriate action (jump, throw, etc.).

The angled perspective, though attractive, causes a small problem: because it makes it difficult to know exactly where you are at any given moment, it can take a lot of practice before you figure out exactly *when* to hit the action button. This problem is particularly noticeable in the hurdles and pole vault (it took us 38 tries before clearing the bar at its *lowest* setting.)

The constant button-punching can turn an event like cycling into a real endurance test, at least for your wrist and thumb, but there's a trick that can make things easier. Because the keyboard and joystick controls are active at the same time, you can hit the joystick button while someone else hits the keyboard. Between the two of you, all that furious pounding can generate some pretty outrageous speeds. When was the last time you saw a javelin thrower sprint almost 40 k/h (nearly 25 mph, faster than even a world record dash) as he approached the foul line?

Once you've practiced the events enough to feel comfortable, you can square off against up to ten other human or computer-controlled opponents in the Summer Challenge Tournament. After the opening ceremonies, you compete in each of the eight events, and the overall winner is the competitor with the highest point total for the medals he or she earns. You can adjust the performance of your computerized opponents from amateur to world class, and save the game after any event and come back later.

If you're playing solo, the thrill of victory may begin to wear thin once you've mastered every event (or decided that there are some events you'll *never* master). But the capability to accommodate so many human opponents gives the game good replay value, and even when you do tire of the game you can still fire it up and let your friends give it their best shot.

Summer Challenge has a lot going for it. It looks great, it's easy to learn, and the animation is superb. There are two other Summer Olympic games currently on the market — *The*

Carl Lewis Challenge from Psygnosis and *International Sports Challenge* from Empire Simulations — but this one takes the gold.

GP

Hardware requirements: 640K RAM; VGA/MCGA graphics; hard drive; supports AdLib, Roland, Sound Blaster, and Thunderboard sound cards, mouse and joystick optional.

PLAN 9 FROM OUTER SPACE

GARY MEREDITH

Does it follow that a film voted "worst of all time" would translate into an equally horrific computer game? Would the subterranean production values of transvestite director Ed Woods' tribute to the 50's flying saucer craze make for an

unplayable adventure? And finally, can deceased ex-wrestler and movie lump Tor Johnson carry a whole game on his stiff but substantial shoulders?

As the Amazing Criswell might say, "my friends, we cannot keep this a secret any longer." Perhaps surprisingly — or not so surprisingly to all of us who get a real kick out of the flick — *Plan 9 from Outer Space* is a good little game.

As anyone who has seen the film can attest, Wood had hardly enough of a plot to hang a hat on, let alone an entire movie. All he did have, in fact, was a scant bit of film he had shot a few years earlier of Bela Lugosi, just days before the actor's death. Fortunately, this **Gremlin** game, distributed by **Konami**, has more going for it. You play a private investigator who, down on his luck, takes on a job for a sleazy film company. Six reels of film have been stolen, and it's up to you to track them down and return them to the producer, who bears a striking resemblance to the aforementioned Tor Johnson. As a matter of fact, a *lot* of male characters you meet resemble the bulky thespian/immovable object, while many of the females bear an uncanny resemblance to Vampira, another no-

table from the original film. Obviously, there aren't many folks in this game you'd call "normal," and things go from bad to worse as you deal with some undead souls who look as though they should have shied away from the budget mortician.

But you must explore every nook and cranny, no matter how disgusting, in order to uncover the film reels. Unlike some games which inundate you with tons of clues and useable items, *Plan 9 from Outer Space* is rather minimalistic (which is only fitting given the nature of the film). In many scenes, there may only be one clue or item, but it could turn out to be *very* hard to find. Initially you may feel you're going around in circles, because there's very little to go on. You won't find much in the diner, for example, but if you're patient you'll uncover a small bonanza of clues in the vacated producer's office, and the private room behind the office.

You should try to talk with everyone you meet, although you'll discover that, at first, most people won't have anything to say to you. That's often because you don't have something they need, so don't give up if a character is initially uncommunicative — keep going back as your inventory grows.

That brings up a vital point — inventory management is extremely critical in *Plan 9*. You're very limited in the amount of items you can carry at any one time, and unlike other graphic adventures there's no place to drop extra items until needed. Whenever you do drop something, a little creature appears, makes off with the dropped item, and is gone forever — or is it? The best strategy for inventory management is to make a note of each item you find, and then

leave it until later, when you really need it.

Plan 9 has a few shortcomings that you won't find in higher-priced games. The graphics window is small, taking up only about a third of the screen. And the interface is a bit clunky because there's no default action button: To examine, say, ten items in a room, click on Examine, then click on an object, then back to examine, then on another object, back to examine...you get the idea.

Plan 9 from Outer Space is both fun and frustrating, with some humorous nods to other

films of the "rotten" genre, and just enough Woodsian flavor to make Bela, Tor, and ol' Ed himself feel vindicated. As a bonus, clips from the original film show up throughout, making *Plan 9 from Outer Space* a real find. I'm just hoping Konami/Gremlin will take on some other "classics," such as *Glen or Glenda* or *The Creeping Terror*.

GP

SPEAR OF DESTINY

MATTHEW A. FIRME

Spear of Destiny from FormGen is a retail version of the fabulous Wolfenstein 3D shareware series, and once again you'll tackle Nazis hellbent on global domination. Your mission this time out: infiltrate the Nazi stronghold at Nuremberg and secure the Spear of Destiny, allegedly used to pierce Christ's side as he hung from the cross. Legend has it that whoever possesses the Spear will be invincible in battle. Knowing of the faith Hitler puts in the supernatural and occult, the Allies hope that capturing the Spear will push him over the edge.

For those unfamiliar with the Wolfenstein 3D concept, you play as American B.J. Blazkowicz, racing through the rooms and passageways of a Nazi stronghold blasting anyone who gets in your way. You view the furious action from an amazingly realistic first-person perspective. And to keep your hide intact during all this mass bloodletting, you must rely on stealth as much as firepower — if you rush blindly into a room and start shooting, a Nazi from another area will usually sneak up behind you and put an end to your commando escapades.

Although Spear looks a lot like the rest of the Wolfenstein 3D series, it does pit you against several new enemies. From slow, methodical guards to the fast, clever, white-suited officers, each class of enemy soldier has its own characteristics and attack methods. There are also several huge, tough boss characters scattered throughout the game — you'll know when you've encountered one of these guys. They can often take 50 slugs or more in the gut without blinking, and they're very good shots. Especially memorable is the four-armed UberMutant, who resembles Frankenstein with a chain gun in his chest.

The labyrinthine corridors of the Nuremberg stronghold, coupled with more Nazis per square yard than were crammed into Hitler's bunker, make Spear one of the toughest games in the Wolfenstein series. In one hallway, for instance, I reached 40 before losing count of the guards and SS men flooding toward me. And often you come under attack as soon as a new level begins. Even those of us who conquered the first games on the toughest setting ("I am Death Incarnate") may have to cut the difficulty back a notch.

The graphics in Spear of Destiny compliment the down-and-dirty action. When you shoot an enemy, blood sprays from his body and he crumples to the floor in a heap. The body stays where it falls, too, serving as a morbid signpost telling you where you've been. It sounds pretty gruesome, but the look and feel of Spear help to place the mayhem in a cartoon- or video game-like context.
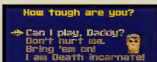
Still, like the other Wolfenstein games, Spear will probably be criticized by some for its graphic portrayal of violence. But in its defense, I would point out that many of the same critics and gamers put off by these titles regularly praise World War II-based strategy games and flight sims. Surely these titles do as much to glorify war, and involve as much taking of life, as do Spear and Wolfenstein 3D. Or is it that, since you don't actually see the drowning crewmen of a torpedoed destroyer, they might have escaped unharmed?

Such objections seem grounded in a double standard: war is suitable material for the lofty, intellectual pursuits of the strategist, but somehow unacceptable in an arcade-action title. Spear and other, more traditional war-based games are equally brutal — Spear is just a bit more honest about it.

One warning regarding hardware. The sticker on the box is a bit unclear as to system requirements. We found the action was slow even on a 386SX/16, shrunken graphic window or no. You'll probably need at least a 386/20 to realize the fun Spear has to offer.

GP

Hardware requirements: 640K RAM; VGA graphics; hard drive; supports AdLib and Sound Blaster sound cards, Disney Sound Source, mouse, joystick, and the Gravis PC Gamepad.

STAR LEGIONS

WILLIAM R. TROTTER

Few computerized Bad Guys have been around for as long as the Krellans. They first appeared in Interstel's 1986 classic *Starfleet I*, resurfaced in its sequel, and are now incarnated, in top-notch graphics, in *Star Legions* from Mindcraft.

Throughout these games, the Krellans have developed conceptually from essentially mindless embodiments of galactic evil into a rounded, admirable (on its own terms) civilization of warriors, with very real concepts of honor, courage, and competence. Playing the role of a Krellan conqueror, therefore, can be a very satisfying alternate existence...if you don't mind wiping out a few trillion

humanoids along the way.

Krellan tactics have become pretty darn sophisticated — they realized long ago that an incinerated planet is a worthless planet. Now the Krellan ideal is a swift, decisive planetary invasion that breaks through shield defenses and rips apart enemy ground troops, while leaving as much of the planet's industry and infrastructure intact as possible.

Of course, to make a Krellan omelette, you may have to break a few eggs. You'll need to call on your orbiting battle cruisers to take out a few cities with photon torpedoes in order to soften up the defenses. Just make sure you destroy a city only as a last resort; the object of

this game is to rise from lowly Commander to exalted rank, and too much reliance on brute destruction will make it very hard for you to gain promotion.

Your first assignments will be easy pickings — planets with few cities and primitive defenses — that serve as good tutorials. More developed worlds require careful strategic planning and reconnaissance, since the maximum number of invasion zones you can strike is eight, and those must be so vital that their conquest compels the surrender of the entire world. Successful campaigns bring not only promotion, but also wealth, slaves, and bucketfuls of medals (the Krellans evidently have more titles and decorations than the Junior Woodchucks!).

Lightly armed shock troops — roughly analogous to paratroopers — teleport to the surface first; they must seize landing-pad sites and defend them until your more heavily armed main force units can be transported from orbit. Once the battle is joined, you take command more or less as you would in any war game, maneuvering your units to gain superiority and to take possession of the city or industrial complex that is your strategic target. You can fight three or four invasion-zone battles simultaneously on the more primitive planets, but on more developed worlds, where timing and maneuver become much more important, you'll probably be better off fighting these battles sequentially.

At first glance, the game's combination of six major control panels, each bristling with command options and toggle-buttons, seems like one of the most daunting interfaces of the year. Once you start playing,
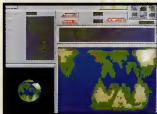
however, the logic of each layout becomes readily apparent. The learning curve is steep — not because any one aspect of the system is needlessly complicated or awkward, but rather because of all the goodies the designers have made room for. And players who remember the impenetrable prose and utter confusion of the documentation of the *Starfleet* games may rest assured that the manual for *Star Legions* is a vast improvement.

There are some lovely little graphic touches embedded in the game, including a set of surveillance cameras that let you see how efficiently your crew is working and how much progress is being made on that poor human captive down in the Torture Room.

Star Legions offers good, solid space-opera entertainment with just enough of a role-playing angle to add depth to all the bloodletting and city-nuking. Considering the nearly astronomical number of possible planets, and all the levels and types of challenges encountered during an entire career in the Krellan fleet, there's a lot of game here for the money. After all, the only thing more satisfying than conquering one planet is, well, conquering a *hundred* planets!

GP

Hardware requirements:
640K RAM; VGA graphic; hard drive; 286 or better; mouse; support AdLib and Sound Blaster sound cards.

SPOILS OF WAR

WILLIAM R. TROTTER

RAW Entertainment has been aggressively positioning itself as a maverick player in the PC games marketplace, using ad space to print "open letters" to the industry, chiding the bigger companies for emphasizing glitz and sexy graphics at the expense of depth and game play.

That philosophy is embodied in *Spoils of War*, one of the most ambitious — and the most complicated — games we've seen in years. *Spoils* tries to incorporate several game genres (Exploration and Colonization, Trade and Resource Management, and Nineteenth-Century War Game), and ends up being a great, bloated muddle.

Four players (human or computer-controlled) vie for supremacy in an unknown world. Each player must explore, colonize, exploit resources, establish trade routes, repel incursions, plunder rivals' colonial outposts, and fight lots of battles on both land and sea. Play commences about 1800 A.D. and continues until one side has accumulated 50,000 victory points, or the year 2000 rolls around.

Once you've set the difficulty and named your side, you must pay to recruit one of four kinds of units, generically (and somewhat confusingly) called Explorers.

Admirals, logically, run

your fleet, convoy your gold and colonists, and explore unknown coastlines. Governors are needed for colonizing, building new settlements and mines, and developing harbors. Generals are your striking arm — they explore the interior, looking for valuable resources and making sure no rival power mounts an overland attack. After you've got some colonies up and running, you may wish to appoint Commanders to run them.

Be aware (since the manual doesn't inform you until page 19) that each Admiral can carry only *one* Explorer, regardless of the number of ships at the Admiral's disposal. The game abounds with such arbitrary rules; they serve no logical function and seem to have been designed intentionally to make the game more difficult.

Colonists have a tendency to die like flies, so if your "seed" settlements take, you'll soon be ferrying boatload after boatload of people into the new territories.

At this stage of play, when your colonial empire is sketched out and most of your commands concern simple routine maintenance and reinforcement, it would be nice to set some of these chores on automatic. No such luck: You must do *everything* yourself, no matter how numbingly repetitious it gets to be.

All battles can be bypassed on a strategic level, with the computer merely adjudicating and reporting the final outcome, or played out in detail on a tactical level, with you in command. The naval battles aren't much — about on par with those found in *Uncharted Waters*. The land battles are more interesting, even fun, albeit in a sim-

plistic sort of way.
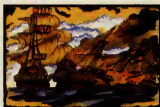
But the question arises: How many players can stick it out long enough to reach the war game segments of *Spoils*? The problem is one of basic design, compounded by an almost maniacal attempt to make the most "user-hostile" interface in the recent history of PC games. The guiding principle in the design of this game seems to have been that if it's possible to take one simple action and break it down into five or six confusing smaller actions, do it. It took us two working days to figure out just the basic mechanics of the game system, and we do this for a living, folks.

Time and time again, the game design simply gets in your face, spoiling any sense of momentum or accomplishment. RAW claims you can find 300 hours of play in the program, and we don't doubt it for a minute. The problem is that after only one-tenth of that time, *Spoils of War* seemed to offer about as much enjoyment as hauling bricks.

Depth, schmepth; there's too much going on in this game, and the effort required to make it all run is so pointlessly difficult that the game doesn't really deliver *entertainment* on any of its three levels.

GP

ATTENTION FLIGHT SIM FANS

he APS-2001 Cobra, a programmable, microprocessor-controlled joystick from The Maxximum Company, is planned for release in February. The stick, which works through the keyboard port, features 19 programmable switches and three optically controlled axes of movement. The user can custom design his or her own interface based on any software package that receives input commands via the keyboard port. Suggested retail price is $89.95. For further details, contact The Maxximum Company, 205 20th St. South, Nampa, ID 83686.

Corps Premium Templates is a new line of color-coded cardboard overlays designed for use with flight

sims. Each template is designed to support a particular flight-sim package, and sells for $11.95 (or $9.25 each when four or more are purchased).

Also announced for a March ship date is Veil of Darkness, a horror-fantasy adventure developed by Event Horizon (DarkSpyre and The Summoning). The storyline is centered around a cargo pilot who sur-

For complete information, contact Keyboard Commander Corp., 4839 SW 148 Ave., Suite 402, Davie, FL 33330.

If you've got a microphone, a Sound Blaster card, and a copy of F-19 Stealth Fighter 2.0, you might want to check out Voice Commander, a software voice-recognition package from Island Imaging that lets you issue verbal commands through the microphone. You can order Voice Commander through Chips & Bits. For more information, you can write to Island Imaging at 201-1012 Plantation Club Drive, Melbourne FL 32940, or call 407-255-9327.

AD LIB RESURRECTED

fter abruptly going out of business last spring, AdLib resurfaced this fall as AdLib Multimedia, Inc. Under new owners — Binnenlatist, a holding company based in Heidelberg, Germany — AdLib recently introduced the Surround Sound Module.

A piggy-back add-on board for the AdLib Gold sound card, the module can create stereo-depth simulation, echo, and reverb. Operating under DOS or Windows, Surround Sound includes several presets that simulate the particular acoustic qualities of a concert hall, jazz club, movie theater, stadium, chapel, or deep space. The Surround Sound module, with a suggested retail price of $89.95, requires no special software support. For more information, contact Ad Lib Multimedia, 220 Grande-Allee East, Suite #850, Quebec (Quebec), Canada G1R 2J1.

ON THE HORIZON

ook for two new titles from SSI this spring. Slated for March release is Tony LaRussa Baseball II, a blend of arcade-style play and strategy based on player and team stats. The original LaRussa game was an excellent baseball sim, and SSI promises to deliver a number of improvements in this sequel. Expect 256-color VGA graphics with a batting perspective from over the batter's shoulder and field play seen from an angled overhead view. Closeups, digitized sound, and play-by-play commentary will also be included. SSI is streamlining the interface and including an old-timer feature with 1,040 "living legend" players and 11 classic ballparks, such as the Polo Grounds, Yankee Stadium, Ebbets Field, etc. LaRussa II will carry a $59.95 suggested retail price, and three expansion disks —MLBPA Teams, Stadiums, and Fantasy Manager—are planned

for release at around the same time as II. Each will be priced in the $20-$30 range.

vives a crash in the Transylvanian Alps in the late 1930s. SSI plans to use a point-and-click interface, and to feature animated cinematic sequences, a large variety of puzzles and traps, complex mazes, and auto-mapping. Veil of Darkness is expected to have a SRP of $59.95.

— continued on page 78

INTERPLAY SIGNS CINEPLAY

nterplay announced an exclusive agreement to distribute new products for Cineplay Interactive. The first title shipped under this new agreement was Power Politics (reviewed elsewhere in this issue). Cineplay was founded by software designer Kellyn Beck and Oscar-winning filmmaker Will Vinton, creator of the Claymation art form.

Also new from Interplay is a customer BBS for access to game hints, upgrades, product demos, and technical support. The BBS accommodates up to 14.4K baud, with communication parameters of 8N1 (supporting v.32bis and v.42bis). The number is 714-252-2822, with lines open 24 hours a day.

Veil of Darkness

77

Coming this spring from **Three-Sixty** is *Battlecruiser 3000 AD*, a futuristic space adventure with flight-sim, strategy, and resource-management components. The game includes more than 50 strategic missions and gives the player complete control of all ship resources, in-

Day of the Tentacle

cluding 1000 personnel. Boasting four different flight models, 3-D Goraud rendering, and ray-traced graphics, *Battlecruiser 3000 AD* requires a 386 or better, DOS 5.0, an expanded memory manager, and a hard drive. Game graphics are 256-color VGA, and a Super VGA upgrade will be available separately. The product is the first from **3000 AD, Inc.**, and was created and developed by Dr. Derek Smart.

Loosely based on their 1987 hit *Maniac Mansion*, LucasArts' *Day of the Tentacle: Maniac Mansion 2* is slated for release this spring. A humor-laced graphic adventure, *Tentacle* is being co-designed by Tim Delacruz and Dave Grossman (*Secret of Monkey Island* and *Monkey Island 2*). In the game, players alternately take on the roles of Hoagie, a mellow roadie for a heavy-metal band; Laverne, an off-the-wall med student; and Bernard, a computer nerd, in an effort to save the world from Dr. Fred's mutant tentacles.

Ultima VII Part Two: Serpent Isle from **Origin** should be available by the time this issue hits newsstands. The sequel to the highly acclaimed *Ultima VII: The Black Gate* picks up the story of that game, putting you in the role of the Avatar. Trapped by the same circumstances that thwarted the Guardian in *The Black Gate*, you'll discover a new realm of Brittania as you jour-

Serpent Isle

ney to the legendary Serpent Isle. The game features improved inventory control, larger and more-detailed closeup portraits, and new magic spells of incredible power. *Serpent Isle* carries a suggested retail price of $79.95.

Also from Origin is *Privateer*, slated for an early fall release. Incorporating technologies developed for *Wing Commander* and *Strike Commander*, this space-combat and trading simulator takes you to the seamy side of the *Wing Commander* universe. As an entrepreneur seeking fortune at the

Privateer

Putt-Putt Joins the Parade

edge of the Federation territory, it's up to you to select a ship and modify it, choose alliances by playing as a pirate, merchant, or mercenary, and select which missions you'll undertake. With nearly 60 bases and planets in almost 90 planetary systems, the variety of missions promises to be huge. *Privateer* will also sell for $79.95.

A new product for the younger set is *The Addams Family Print Gallery* from **Hi Tech Expressions**. Featuring the Hanna-Barbera animated characters Gomez, Morticia, Wednesday, Pugsley, and Cousin Itt, *Print Gallery* can create signs, banners, stationery, coloring books, etc., and includes a variety of clip art. For more information, contact Hi-Tech Expressions Computer Software, 584 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

Humongous Entertainment is a new name in the industry, but its two founders are seasoned computer-game veterans. Ron Gilbert designed LucasArts' SCUMM development system and created a variety of the company's more successful graphic adventures. Shelley Day produced games for Electronic Arts, Accolade, Taito, and LucasArts. Their initial launch will be the Junior Adventure line of games, targeted to ages 3-7. First up from this lineup is *Putt-Putt Joins the*

Parade, a colorful adventure that includes puzzle-solving and several self-contained games. A second line of products will be aimed at ages 15 and up. All Humongous titles will use the highly regarded SCUMM system, and will be available for PCs, Macs, and in CD-ROM

format. Electronic Arts distributes all Humongous titles. For more information, contact Humongous Entertainment, 12930 NE 178th St., Woodinville, WA 98072.

Another new learning title that recently hit store shelves is Legacy **Soft**ware's *Mutanoid Word Challenge*, a spelling game with strong arcade-style play elements. The program includes a 65,000-word on-disk dictionary and focuses on 2,000 of the most commonly misspelled words. *Mutanoid Word Challenge* also includes four difficulty levels, an adjustable timer, and on-line help. Suggested retail price is $49.95, and a school and lab-pack version are available for $69.95 and $149.95, respectively. For more details, contact Legacy Software, 9338 Reseda Blvd., 2nd Floor, Northridge CA 91324. *GP*

DIRECTORY
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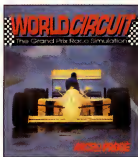
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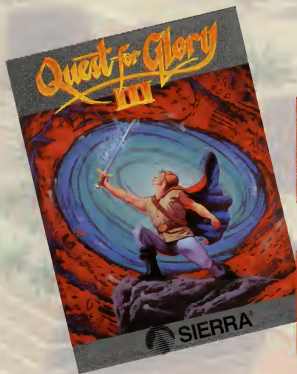
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